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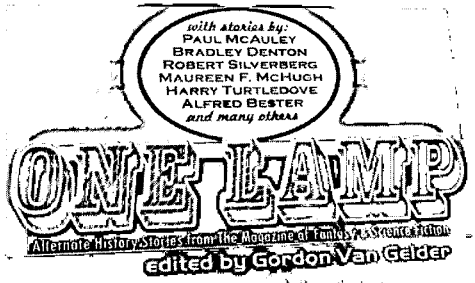

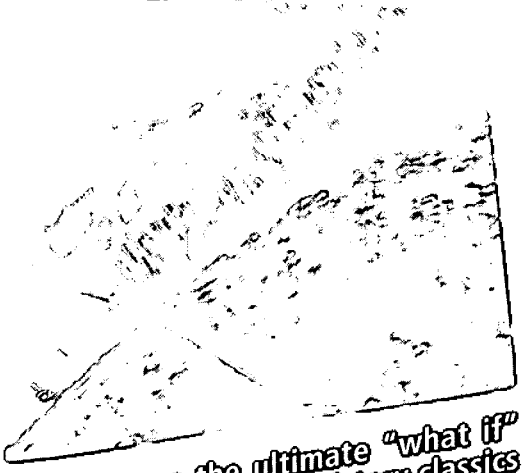

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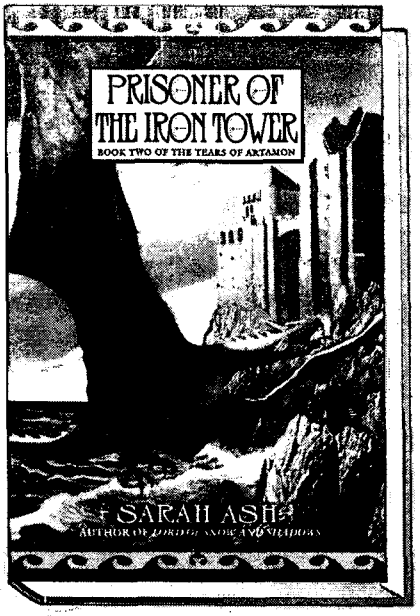

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Fantasy&ScienceFiction
August • 55th Year of Publication

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Robert Reed introduced us to the Native American boy named Raven in our Dec. 2001 issue and followed up with "Buffalo Wolf" in our March 2003 issue. His third excursion into Raven's world shows us what some people will do to keep their secrets safe.

The Condor's Green-Eyed Child

By Robert Reed

THE BIRD MUST HAVE DIED during the storm, seared by lightning or blinded by hailstones. Or a gust of wind had dashed it against the earth. Unless a different wind had lifted it upward, up where the sky became nothingness, and the bird had suffocated and frozen, tumbling limp and doomed to the spirit realm below.

Whatever had happened, Raven could see that this had been a spectacular creature in life, just as it was an astonishing carcass in death. The wings were vast and broad, good for soaring lazily along high hot ridges. The plumage was black and shiny, smelling of fire and still wearing silvery beads of spent rain. What must have been the head lay buried in the sandy ground. Judging by the angle of the body and the upraised tail, it had sliced like a blade into the heart of the juniper woods. This could be important, thought Raven. But he didn't know why it was important, and it would take time for him to see what was obvious.

He asked his grandfather what he should do now. But the old man was a full day's walk from here. There was nobody to advise him, which was

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the way it was supposed to be. For as long as anyone could remember, the young shaman reached a point where he had to go out into the spirit realm, hiding from the demons while he mastered his craft, and along the way, in little steps and large leaps, he tried to make himself into something that was more like a man.

"You are too young," Raven's mother had warned. Yet in the next breath, with a grim disgust, she admitted, "Except everything changes too fast now, and it seems that we cannot wait. Go and see what there is to see, but be careful. Will you be careful, Raven?"

"Never," he had joked. Yet after four nights of walking and four days of cautious rest, here was his first bold moment.

Demons must have planted these junipers. In old times, fires swept across the world, the grass surviving inside the cool earth, laughing at the foolish trees burning above. Then the demons came, taking away the great fires while cultivating little forests to make this world more like their own. And that was not always a bad thing. It was easy to hide inside the shadowy woods. Dense stands of old junipers were nearly impenetrable. Every tree stood too close to its neighbors, each still alive up high but dying at the low edges where the branches meshed. It was impossible to see any distance inside the woods, which made them perfect for sleep. But moving through them was endless, exhausting work. Despite Raven's best efforts, dead limbs rattled as he eased past, and sometimes the dried wood cracked sharply. Even an inattentive demon might notice his passing. If Raven had been careful, he would have retreated to the far end of the woods and made camp, eating what was left in his satchel and then sleeping in the light, wakeful fashion that the People had mastered. But the dead bird looked so enormous and mysterious and wonderful that he couldn't just shy away from it.

Raven coyote-slinked to where he could stare up at the giant belly and what must have been the bird's feet. Then he stood slowly, touching one of the rubbery feet, expecting to feel nothing. No heart or motor, nothing but a perfect stillness. And for a moment, he felt death. But then something stirred inside the carcass, startling him. He nearly let his hand drop. Then he clung to the dead foot, feeling the vibrations running up into his fingers and arm. What did he feel here? It took several breaths for him to piece together the little clues. And even then, he wasn't certain about

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anything. Which is a good way to be, provided you remember that you know nothing.

The bird's plumage looked quite real, and that probably meant something. Raven pulled a pair of feathers from the dead belly, and then he slowly, slowly worked his way beneath the far wing, teasing loose a flight feather from what passed as flesh. The feather stretched from his fingertips to the damp pit of his arm. It was black and a little damp and lighter in the hand than seemed natural, and when it cut through the air, there wasn't any air. It was that sharp and slick, impressive and a little frightening too, and after a moment Raven put it and the other feathers on the ground, as if they had fallen there by themselves.

When he moved again, trying to work his way around the great wing, one of the dried branches that had been bent down by the bird's impact suddenly slipped free, slapping hard against the belly.

"Hello?"

Raven instantly stopped.

"Hello?"

He could believe many things, but as Grandfather had taught him, what was simplest was most often true.

"Are you there?"

A demon girl was speaking. That was the simple explanation. Raven wasn't hearing a spirit or ghost or someone's odd magic, and he probably wasn't imagining the voice, since he hadn't been alone long enough to become crazy.

"Hi!"

A demon girl was speaking from inside the bird's belly.

"Talk to me," she said.

Using every trick, Raven merged with the darkest shadows. There was a long silence, and then the dead bird began to rock back and forth. There came a little hiss, and the demon said, "Stupid branches." Her voice was louder now, tired and a little scared. "Sorry, Greggie...I can't get the hatch open...."

Raven touched the charm hung around his neck, merging even deeper with the shadows as he took a measured step backward.

"Greggie? Can you hear me?"

"Who was it?" said a boy's voice.

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The girl started to move again, the enormous but nearly weightless bird acting as if it were trying to rise from the dead. One of the juniper branches shattered with a dry report, and then another snapped. But she couldn't work herself free.

"Did you hear something?" the boy asked.

"No," she said.

"I heard somebody walking," the boy reported. "You shouted at them, didn't you?"

"It wasn't anybody," the girl reported. She was breathing quietly and quickly, sometimes sniffing back tears. Then with a sad, tiny voice, she told both of them, "We're alone here, Greggie. Alone. And that's just the way it is."

RAVEN CREPT HIS WAY out to the edge of the wood, knelt and ate his last slice of short-hair jerky. The charm that dangled from his neck was old and very powerful. It was made from an owl's foot and feathers wrapped tight inside a bat's wing, and when he touched the soft wing he felt himself growing clear as water. Sometimes he would watch the river and the ash woods beyond the river, studying how the rising Sun changed the look of the world, and sometimes he would hunker down low, pretending to sleep. But mostly he listened to the wind and the occasional word that found its way to him. The demon girl would speak, and sometimes the boy answered. Then Grandfather interrupted his longest sleep, telling him again, "This is important, this business that you're doing. Or it is nothing. But either way, it is your business. Your pathway, and your manhood."

Raven woke with a start. For a moment, between blinks, he saw a man standing on the open ground. But then there was nobody to see, and he decided that he was dreaming. It still wasn't midday, yet he couldn't sleep any longer. For a moment or two, Raven considered slipping across the river to hide in the next woods. But remaining here seemed like the safer course: Demons had a powerful talent for moving quickly. At any moment, they might drop out of the sky to rescue one of their own. Regardless of his magic, if Raven were caught in the open, he would be noticed. But if he remained inside the junipers, under the demons' smug

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noses, he would remain undetected. To a demon's mind, Raven didn't exist. Which was another way in which Raven kept invisible. The demons couldn't even suspect that the People still walked in the world, keeping to the shadows, waiting for their chance to reclaim what was theirs.

Yet demons were not fools. They could see much of the world at a glance, and every day their eyes seemed to grow sharper. Raven guessed that somebody was searching for these two children. But nobody had come for them yet, and for the first time, he wondered if perhaps nobody would come.

It was well after midday when the girl finally managed to crawl free of the dead bird. Raven heard tree limbs shattering, giving her enough room, and then came the happy sounds announcing her success. She said, "Greggie," several times, louder and louder. She asked, "Can you hear me, Greggie?" And then even the favorable winds didn't bring her voice, happy or otherwise.

Raven packed his belongings, intending to leave.

In his mind, he had already slipped out of the woods, a knowing eye finding the best route across packed sand and dense grass, leaving nothing behind but his scent and maybe the occasional mark of a toe.

Yet even as his imaginary self made its escape, Raven slipped back inside the woods. Against every rule, he circled the dead bird, and for the first time, he realized that despite its size, it was probably invisible from the air. The junipers were too tall and too densely packed, their shadows reaching above the highest tail feather. And the voices that might have called for help — those magical radio voices that demons used and were used by — had been silenced by the storm or the impact. Like the girl had told her companion, they were completely alone, and they probably didn't know where they were, and at long last, it occurred to Raven that one of them was badly hurt.

"How do you feel?" she was asking.

Greggie looked pale and small. In years, he was perhaps Raven's age, but demons remained children longer than the People did. He looked tiny and cold, his face scrunched up in pain.

"Can you hear me?" asked the girl.

They had flown inside the bird's body. Now they were huddled together in the darkness, sharing a tiny space beneath the dead branches.

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The top of the bird's body was half-opened, and from what he could see, the two of them had laid on their bellies inside the bird. How did they see where they were flying? Maybe through the bird's mechanical eyes. And then Raven asked himself how would such a thing feel, soaring lightly over the high dunes and the ocean of sweet spring grass.

"Say something," the girl muttered.

The boy responded, but from ten steps away, Raven couldn't make out his words.

She said, "No," to him.

After a while, she said, "No," again. "We'll be fine."

The boy was going to die. He was hurt inside his body, somewhere deep, and the wounds were infecting the rest of him. Raven had seen deer die this way. It was awful, slow and very painful, but there was nothing to be done.

"I'm not leaving you," the girl promised.

Then she would die too.

Again, Raven decided to leave. His practiced mind mapped out the best route, betraying nothing about his presence. Focused, he could be very quiet and surprisingly quick. Nobody would know that he had been here. But then, with a stubbornness that he had never seen before, his body refused to do what his mind had planned.

"They'll find us soon enough," said the girl to the dying boy.

Just from the sound of her voice, using that language that he barely knew, Raven could tell she was lying. The girl sounded brave and acted certain, but she was older than her companion, and wise enough to see the awful future bearing down on this wounded demon.

Raven followed his escape route, but only for a little while.

Having made one enormous choice, the next hundred choices were obvious. What would have seemed impossible just last night felt inevitable, and he refused to think about what he was doing. He just did it. Down by the river was a wealth of driftwood and grass. With hands and a demon's bright steel knife, he built a small travois, and then he filled his water sack in the river and put it on the travois and dragged both back to the edge of the woods. Then he stopped and thought hard. Out of habit, he spoke to his grandfather and his mother, seeking advice. But his uncle was a better source of inspiration. Raven closed his eyes, imagining a man who

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had lived happily in both realms. According to some, Shadow-Below was a traitor to the People. But today he was happy to advise Raven, and afterward he hovered nearby, watching appreciatively as the boy set to work.

First, Raven had to lure the girl out of the woods. He did this by circling the woods, and using his best demon voice, he said, "Over here."

"Where are you?" she called out.

"Here," he repeated.

The girl started crawling through the tangle, working hard enough to carry ten bodies out of the woods. But she brought only herself, and not knowing the shape of the wood, she pushed through the longest, densest stretch of trees. Raven circled around and slipped inside the wood. Greggie was dying beneath the same tree. He was paler than any normal demon and a little hot despite the deep shade, but his eyes seemed to open, registering a stranger looming over him.

Raven grabbed him up, dragged him out into the open.

"Where are you?" the girl kept asking. "I heard you. Where are you? Who are you? I'm sure I heard you before. Hello!"

She didn't hear Raven stealing away her companion. If she had, some things might have been easier. Other things would have been harder. But this was what happened, and there was no purpose in doubt or little fears now. Raven dragged Greggie to the travois and tied him down with the soft grass, and then for a moment, he thought about giving him a drink. But some old lesson told him otherwise. Then he lifted one end of the travois and started to walk, dragging it across the softest sand, making certain that he left a wide, obvious trail — a pair of ruts deep enough that even a foolish demon could follow.

From inside the woods, the girl screamed.

"Where did you go?" she asked nobody.

The only possible route was to follow the river downstream. But even then, the boy almost certainly would die, and regardless what happened to him, the world was going to be left in terrible peril. The People would survive only as long as the demons didn't know about them, and what was Raven doing? He was breaking every good law, and for doing that, he would have to shoulder the blame for everything awful that was coming.

"And everything good," his grandfather whispered.

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The truth was, Raven knew nothing about what was coming, and he tried to remind himself of that one very sweet blessing.

Raven was living only his tenth year, but the world had changed much since his birth. While he was still a child by every measure, this country was full of short-hairs and wire fences and the few old demons who owned everything. But most of those demons had left now, slaughtering the animals and trading away the land, their fences were pulled out of the ground and rolled up. Then came the new herds, which looked much like the original herds. The buffalo returned, and the wapiti, and pronghorn in numbers that Raven had never seen before. Where the People lived, there still were short-hairs and little fences. A demon named Blue Clad hadn't turned his back on his livelihood. But this country was something else entirely. After leaving the People's world, Raven had gradually worked his way upstream, crossing ground that he had never seen before, watching animals that he knew only from legend, feeling amazed and frightened and wary for many good reasons but also happier than he had ever been.

Today, the herds were somewhere else. Which was normal enough. There was only so much grass in the world, and the buffalo had huge bellies to fill, which was why they covered so much distance. But a large herd had crossed this land just days ago, judging by a thousand signs. Raven dragged the travois through piles of partly-dried dung. He studied the massive prints left by hooves, and he could see where the big animals had rolled on the bare sand and dust, digging the beginnings of fresh wallows. Yet these weren't the same buffalo that lived in the old times. They belonged to new demons that had just come into this country, and many of these animals hadn't been conceived in any natural way. To the best of his ability, Grandfather had tried explaining how giant glass tubs could be filled with fancy water, and then a single egg was set free, growing fast and becoming an animal that would be born without any mother; and how within just a few seasons, the new creature would be ready for the world.

The buffalo and wapiti were born this way. That was the only way to make a multitude in such a little while. And there were other creatures with similar origins: The great wolves, and the cougars lurking in the woods, and two kinds of bears. But predators were much harder to grow.

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They needed parents of some kind, and like the People, it took time to teach them how to act like a good wolf or cat or bear.

How the demons taught the animals, Grandfather didn't know.

"I don't understand much about this new world," he mentioned to Raven, walking beside him now. "I can help you, but only so far. The rest is up to you."

Nobody was beside Raven.

He looked back again, as he did every few breaths. The dying boy appeared hot and very weak, lying limp on the little travois. But he weighed more than seemed right. A wet cough preceded a tipping of the head, and then he threw up, the remnants of his last meal mixed with a stinking load of bile.

Raven almost spoke to him. Almost said, "You'll be fine."

Why didn't he say it? Because the boy would hear his voice? Or because it wasn't a kindness to give him hope?

Raven stopped dragging the travois, and again the boy heaved. Then he opened his eyes, staring up at Raven. And a little voice tried to speak, catching twice inside a dry raw throat before finally saying, "Mara."

Raven didn't know that word.

"Don't tell," said the boy.

Greggie. That was his name, wasn't it?

"Don't tell Daddy. Don't." Then the boy's body tightened, and he sobbed, saying, "That I got sick. Don't tell him, Mara."

Raven said nothing.

"I'm sorry...."

Almost too late, Raven looked up. The top of a head had just come into view, moving around the edge of a low bluff. He saw the bright black hair riding on the head, and he could imagine the body running under it. But with her eyes down, following the tracks, she gave him time to set down the travois and retrieve his satchel and water sack before running up the nearby draw on quick, quiet feet.

Every piece of the world has its hiding place.

Raven chose an ash tree that had been injured in its youth, leaving the trunk growing sideways across the draw. Hunkering deep in its shadow, he could see the dying boy and the open ground on all sides. He listened to the girl approach and then heard her stop short, standing just out of

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view. A little wind blew down the draw, and for a moment, Raven thought he could smell a person. What person? Then the boy tried to lift an arm, but he lacked that simple strength, and the girl walked the last little distance up to the travois and knelt, talking in whispers, touching his face once and again and whispering questions and the boy saying nothing at all. Then she fell silent, using the end of her shirt to wipe at his hot face, her own face looking sorry and grim, and then she looked up at the river bluffs, her eyes very much afraid.

Her fear was useful, Raven decided. She had no way to know who had dragged the travois and her companion to this place. As a rule, demons let their fears rule them. But just as he felt confident enough to relax, the girl stood again, her scared eyes giving his hiding place a good long stare.

Raven had left few traces, but she made a lucky guess. Or maybe she was thinking like someone who wanted to hide, and of course the draw was the obvious place. Or maybe he had been too smug about his talents, and she was following a perfectly obvious set of footprints — a boy's bare tracks left in the warm pale sand — leading her up to the mouth of the draw.

A gust of wind caused the brush around him to nod, and while it dipped down, Raven crouched lower.

With eight strides between them, the girl stopped.

One more step and he would run away. She would see nothing but an animal fleeing and maybe the shine of his bare back, and after a little while he would reach the high plains and the open ground. He wouldn't stop running for three days, Raven promised himself. But then she took that next step, and he did nothing. He just kept very still, slowly slipping his left hand over his eyes to peer between the fingers. Demons and the People saw eyes before anything. He kept his eyes hidden, and she took another step — a little one — before her fears finally made her stop.

From no distance at all, Raven stared. The girl was older than he had first guessed. Her hips were growing and her breasts were trying to follow. She would never be a tall woman, he sensed, but she was taller than he was today. Her hair was black, curly, and thick except where it had been tied into intricate little ropes and dyed a strange bloody red, and her eyes were large and busy, colored a soft wet green, and the whole of her face was exceptionally pretty. He was embarrassed by how pretty she looked. A

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demon girl. Pure-bred, according to her color and shape. She was the enemy of enemies, one of the creatures that had come to this world to destroy all that was good, and she had no right to be lovely like this. It was a trick. It was some kind of magic on her part, trying to bewitch Raven. If he could have risked moving, he would have yanked another one of Grandfather's charms out of his satchel and used its power to make her homely. But he could not move, or breathe, and again, ignoring her suffocating fears, she took another tiny step forward.

"I see you."

Raven was nearly fooled. He came close to running, his legs tensing under him as he took a secret deep breath. But she was looking into the wrong shadow, saying again, "I can see you."

Only her imagination saw him. What did she imagine?

"Who are you?"

No one is here, he told himself.

"Before," she said. Then she took a breath, glancing over her shoulder for a moment. "I thought I heard deer. Or a grizzly, maybe. While I was still inside the plane, I thought you'd come to see who crashed in your woods."

Go away, he thought.

Incredibly, she said, "Maybe you are a bear." Then she very nearly smiled, the pretty face shining now. "It's nice of you, helping. I guess." Her feet stirred under her, but she couldn't make herself step forward again. "It's my fault, all of this. Borrowing the condor and going for a little flight. I wouldn't have brought Greggie, but he was going to tell on me...."

The boy was her brother. Finally, Raven could see the resemblance in their faces.

"I never should have disabled the GPS. And I should have brought a phone, I know. But they could have tracked us, and I didn't want to be found. You know what I mean?"

In a sense, he did know.

"You're trying to help us. Aren't you?"

Was he? Honestly, Raven couldn't decipher his motives or decide on his eventual goals.

"I don't really know where I am," she admitted. "I'm not even sure which river this is. We got caught in that storm, and we bounced for weeks, it seemed like...and I don't know anything for sure...."

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Her voice trailed away. She glanced back at her little brother, and then her imagination heard something stir in the shadows. Her face came back around, the bright black hair glistening in the afternoon Sun. She was staring straight at Raven. In her eyes, he saw her imagining many faces and perhaps even a helpful bear. Then she said, "It's the quickest way to find help, isn't it? Follow the water down to wherever it leads us...is that where I'm going...?"

If it were necessary, if Raven had no choice but to protect himself and the People, he would kill this demon. He told himself that, but when he tried to imagine using his knife, slicing open her long throat...all he could feel was confusion and a strange and very useless sadness.

"Thank you," the girl suddenly told him.

Staring at his hiding place, she took a backward step, and then another. Then her eyes lifted a little, and to the entire draw, she said, "My name's Mara Bounty. And I'll warn you, if you hurt either of us, our father will destroy you."

Then she turned and ran back to the travois, and Raven backed away, quietly following the draw up to the open and much safer country.

THE PASSING HERD had left behind one of their own. The young bull buffalo, born without a mother and a little foolish, must have stumbled into a hole, injuring his leg, and after a few days of following the others he had weakened too much, finding a little valley of sweet grass where he could eat enough to ease the pain in his belly, telling himself that he was getting well even as his body weakened and his blood turned to poison. He had finally died in the night, Raven judged. The Sun had worked on his fresh carcass for much of the day, softening it a little bit, and the sandy ground showed where coyotes had come to gnaw at the nose and ears and his balls. But buffalo had tough hides, and most of the scavengers preferred help. Like the sleek black raven sitting on the dead animal's hump, glaring straight at the intruder.

"You and I share a name," Raven began.

"I share nothing," the great bird responded with a hard, menacing squawk. "Go away now."

The coyotes remained close, and two kinds of vultures circled in the

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bright blue sky. But only this lone raven had the courage to claim the treasure for himself.

"You are a brave soul," Raven told him.

"I am brave," the bird agreed.

"I have a knife." Raven unsheathed the bright steel blade. "I will take a little meat, leaving a hole for you to eat through."

"I do not need you," the bird countered.

Raven intended to take only what he needed, regardless of permission. But something in his opponent's stance and voice warned him. Quietly, he asked the bird, "Why don't you need me?"

"I know a bear," the raven explained. "I went to find him, to tell him about this treasure, and he is coming now to smash open this damned hide for me."

"But you are here now," Raven observed.

The bird smugly said nothing.

I have no time to waste, the boy realized. In a sprint, he ran toward the carcass, chasing off the raven and then using both hands and the sharp knife to cut at the animal's hump. Angry curses filled the air. Then the bird vanished over the next dune and came back again in a moment, landing on the rump of the carcass, still smug as could be. As Raven pulled the meat free, he glanced up, and for the first time in his life, he saw one of the new grizzlies — a great white-silver creature half as big as a bison and more dangerous by a long ways. The bear was charging down through the green grass, and Raven pressed the hump against his chest and ran away, feeling scared until the bear stopped to claim the carcass, and then he was smiling with a boy's delight at his cleverness and good luck.

Mara had covered a little distance in his absence.

Unseen, he watched her from the high bluffs. She was dragging the travois as fast as possible, but her strength was already failing. She needed rest and food, which was why Raven moved ahead of her by two long bends of the river, selecting a piece of flat ground after a little wood. Raven collected timber and some grass leftover from last year, everything dried by a long day of hard sunshine, and with a piece of scrap steel and a trusted flint, he made sparks. The fire was shy, but eventually it came to life. Then he cut the hump to strips and set it cooking above the fire, and he gave the fire enough green wood to make smoke, thinking that perhaps the demons

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would notice the gray rope rising up in the dying light of day. Then he retreated back into the woods, barely enough time left to hide before Mara passed by, dragging her brother with her.

Greggie was still alive, but when his sister dropped the travois, he didn't even pretend to wake up. He lay motionless and limp, his soft dying face turned to the side and the dry mouth held ajar.

Mara examined the fire and its surroundings.

Raven assumed that she would try to find him again. He had a pair of charms ready to use, to make her seem ugly if she came close. But no, she didn't waste the effort. She quickly pulled the cooked meat off the spits, eating two pieces and reasonably stowing the rest on the travois, between her brother's feet. She didn't seem to think about staying the night there, but she wondered if the fire might be noticed. That was why she piled the rest of the wood on top of it, making the flames leap as the Sun began dropping toward the horizon.

Setting a last pair of sticks on open ground, she fashioned an arrow pointing downstream. Maybe there was a watchful eye hanging in the sky, and it might follow her in the proper direction.

Raven could not help but feel impressed with the demons' magic.

And then with renewed energy, the girl picked up the travois by the long poles, and with an audible sob, she started off again.

He listened to her sobbing until he heard nothing more. Then Raven dragged more wood into the fire, feeding it and then shaping the blaze until it could be seen from the stars, and then he began to run toward the rising night, stopping only to lay more pairs of sticks on the bare patches of ground, in case the demons required even more help.

Demons outnumbered the bison, and they were wealthy beyond measure, and often they were a little blind and amazingly foolish, impatient but also relentless in things that caught their gaze. Their realm was vast, and it was woven from what was real and what had been born out of dreams. Many of them were entirely evil, but some were less awful. A few of them had enough good to be allies to the People. Maybe this Mara girl was that way, Raven told himself, running as fast as he could to catch her.

"Don't be stupid," his uncle warned him.

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"I am not stupid," Raven replied.

Shadow-Below laughed at him. He was a tall man, powerfully built and utterly confident, and he dressed as a demon, in jeans and fancy laced slippers and a shirt that told Raven to drink a certain drink in order to perform at his best. He was the brightest part of the night, running beside his nephew with an easy long gait, and he would not stop laughing. "Of all the demons you could help, you picked one of the very worst," he said.

"I did not pick her," he countered.

Then after a moment of careful thought, he added, "She hasn't even seen me."

"Her brother saw you."

Maybe so.

"And she knows you are here."

"She can't know anything for certain," Raven said.

The apparition dismissed him with a snort. "I know where you are taking them. And I know that you know that the boy has no chance."

Raven said nothing.

"He's too sick to live out the night," said Shadow-Below. Then he smiled in a menacing way, teeth shining in the moonless dark. "And if you think the girl will survive the journey too — "

"She will," he blurted.

"How do you know this?" Shadow-Below made a laughing face, but his voice was a low growl. "I found you out here, remember. And you should ask yourself: What else does my traitorous old uncle know?"

And then Raven was running alone.

But he wasn't alone. The travois suddenly appeared before him, not twenty strides away. The dying brother lay on it, sobbing and pulling weakly at the grass knots, while Mara had dropped to her knees, arms limp against her sides. She was resting. She hadn't been resting long, but her body and the slumping head showed a deep fatigue that wouldn't leave her alone. She was gasping and crying softly, and sometimes she would try to lift the arms, wishing for their strength to return.

The boy has to die now, thought Raven, and then she will continue. Kneeling between the travois's ruts, he considered what was possible and how he could help. But he couldn't show himself again. That would be far

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too dangerous. What he needed was to give her water and more food, if possible, and to coax her without endangering the People.

But Mara needed no coaxing. Somehow she climbed to her feet and pulled a little knife from a pocket, unfolding its tiny blade and then cutting at the bottom of her shirt. Her belly was narrow and pale. With heavy hands, she cut the fabric into long strips, and then she tied the strips to the travois's handles, creating a pair of slings that she managed to slip over her shoulders, and after one failed attempt, she took a deep breath and stood upright again, the weight carried by her shoulders and back now, not by the useless arms.

Perhaps Greggie would live, Raven decided.

Silently he followed Mara and her brother. He could see her lower back glowing in the starlight, and the travois creaked and groaned, and he listened to both of the children breathing heavily. Another few turns of the river, and they would reach a very tall fence. Beneath the fence was a secret hole. Raven had crawled through it when he left the People's sanctuary. He would move ahead of her then and mark the way, and she would follow him onto one of the last remaining ranches. Another few bends of the river, and she would pass by the People's home, seeing nothing. And with another few bends — sometime by midday, most likely — Mara and her brother's dead body would reach the house where Blue Clad lived, and the good demons there that would gladly help her....

It was Raven's only plan, and it survived right up until the moment when someone called out from a distance.

"Over here," the voice shouted.

Mara took another step, and then stopped. Listening.

"We've been hunting for you," said a demon. "We've been awfully worried. Everybody will be glad to see you again."

The words were clear but not close. Raven looked off in the direction of the voice, toward the south, seeing nothing but a wall of old trees. From inside the trees, the demon said, "Can you hear me?"

"Yes," Mara replied.

"Come over here then."

Raven slipped closer, watching the girl. She was tugging at the cut-up shirt, trying to make it cover her bare belly. Her breathing came fast and shallow, and by the tilt of her body, she seemed hopeful. But then

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she told the voice, "No," and added, "You come here first."

Raven knelt, waiting.

"But I can't," said the demon. "Sorry. I fell in a stupid hole."

"You're hurt?"

"Just my knee is."

Raven listened to voice, and then to the silence afterward. A cold dread fell on him. He remembered the figure that he had seen in the open yesterday, and then the scent that came to him in the draw. He suddenly stood up, ready to run toward Mara. But he thought again, kneeling halfway, glancing at the grass and the earth, working hard to memorize everything.

"Who are you?" Mara asked.

"Jason Cole," the voice responded, almost too quickly. "I don't think you know me."

"I don't."

"I want to help. But it's kind of tough, being stuck here — "

"In the hole?"

"Stay there, if you want," the voice said. "Help's coming. Maybe in a few minutes, maybe an hour."

Mara was trying to push away her tiredness, trying to decide what to do.

"What's my name?" she finally asked.

There was a pause. Then the voice told her, "Mara, of course. Mara Bounty."

In the gloom, she looked happy. Suddenly her body pitched forward, and she began to drag her brother toward the trees and the bodiless voice. With a giddy joy, she said, "They found us, Greggie. We're going to be all right. Hang on, okay? Okay? We're almost safe now."

Raven jumped up, calling out, "No."

Mara stopped, her head pivoting.

"Don't trust the voice," he warned.

Mara didn't know what to do. She stood motionless, using the last of her strength to hold up the travois, and quietly, sadly, she asked, "But why should I trust you?"

"I'm helping you," Raven replied.

The girl was exhausted in every possible way, but still, she had

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strength enough and the poise to shout out, "I don't believe either of you."

The new voice said nothing. But the man attached to voice was moving, silently running away from the trees.

"I think you're both phantoms."

The girl had a gift for saying words that Raven didn't expect to hear. He stood up and tried to follow the man's progress, waiting for any idea that would tell him what he should do next.

"If you want to help us," Mara called out, "then help us."

He was helping.

"Pull my brother for me," she called out. "If you won't pull him, then you aren't real. You're just a stupid phantom. Or you're real, but you aren't anything but a mean son-of-a-bitch."

SHE DID NOT SEE Raven, and then he was standing beside her, unnoticed. Then Mara happened to turn, finding him within easy reach, but the surprise didn't show until she saw the long knife pulled from the sheath, her voice catching in her throat the first time she tried to speak. "Don't," she managed on her second attempt. Then she swallowed and told him, "Make it quick. If you're going to do it. Please?"

In the darkness, close like this, she wasn't pretty. She was a forehead taller than Raven, pale as smoke and stinking of fear. She was a strange and crazy woman-demon pushing out her chin to show off her neck, and her eyes were closed tight enough that they didn't see him lift the knife, turning it in his hand until he was holding it by the back of the broad cool blade.

"What?" she blubbered.

He grabbed Mara by the wrist, pushing the hilt into her blistered palm. Then he laid a finger across her startled mouth.

Silence, he meant.

Her brother was coal-hot to the touch. If the fever didn't kill him, exhaustion and the lack of water soon would. Raven looked at the shrunken face, eyes turning back into the skull, and he tried hard to accept what couldn't be helped. Then he looked at Mara's face, searching it for any sign of resignation. But all she did was begin to walk, carrying the knife in her left hand, muttering, "How much farther?"

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Too far, he thought.

"Come on," she told him.

Raven said, "Quiet."

A male grouse squawked in his sleep — a big rough noise that startled her. She looked out into the darkness, lifting the knife too high to be useful. Raven had enough time to shoulder the travois, dragging it past her, saying again, with his clearest demon voice, "Quiet."

Mara fell in beside him, and for maybe a hundred steps, she managed to remain silent.

"Who was he?" she finally asked. "The voice by the river...who is he...?"

A man named One-Less-Than-One, he thought. But he said nothing.

"Do you know him?"

He didn't speak or even nod.

The girl was watching him, asking, "Who are you?"

Nobody.

In starlight, Raven looked like a black-haired boy wearing nothing but a pair of black demon shorts, dusty and torn, a satchel and a knife sheath hanging from his little rope belt. He was barefoot and longer-legged than most of the People, but he was too young and small to drag the boy any faster than he was now.

"What are you?"

A phantom.

She seemed to hear his thoughts. Or maybe her thoughts twisted back around again. After another hundred steps, she asked, "How did he know my name?"

"You said it," he replied, surprising both of them.

"When?" she blurted. Then she remembered, saying, "When I caught up to you and Greggie. He heard me talking?"

That would explain much.

"So both of you, whoever you are...you've been with me ever since the plane. Is that right?"

Finally, Raven realized that One-Less must have followed him from home, out into the spirit realm, watching his progress and waiting for him to need help. Did Grandfather send the man on this chore? Probably not. Ever since Raven's uncle left the People, One-Less had wanted to become

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the next shaman in waiting. But according to Grandfather, the man had no flair for magic, too much temper and little sense. What the man must have decided...he must have taken this chore on himself, thinking that if he could prove his worth to the People and the old man...or almost as good, if Raven had stumbled badly...then he would be left as the only worthy leader in the world....

"The crash was my fault," said Mara. "I was stupid. And then I should have brought supplies, or at least a sat-phone."

Raven stopped walking, and when she looked at him again, he set his finger against her lips. "Quiet," he whispered.

"Why? Do you think he can't hear us walking? That we might actually slip away somehow?"

"No," Raven admitted. "But when you talk, I can't hear that well. It makes it harder for me to see him out there."

The explanation won some cool amazement.

Again, they walked in silence. And when the silence ended, Mara was careful to speak softly and quickly.

"What are you?"

Raven stopped, tilting his head. Whenever you walked in the demons' world, you needed a false name and an imagined life. Quietly, quietly, he gave her a senseless name for himself and a place name for his home.

"Really? I thought you were some kind of bear-spirit," she said, halfway joking.

Then after a few moments, she asked, "What are you doing out here? Dressed like this and all?"

"He's my father," Raven lied.

"Who? The other one?"

He nodded soberly, making his face sad and worried. Then he looked at her, saying, "My father is insane."

She absorbed the news.

"We came out here two weeks ago," he lied. "To live free. But he went crazy, and I've been trying to survive — "

"You poor kid," she sputtered.

But he wasn't a child, and he bristled. She was more a child than he was, and her little brother was more a child than Raven had been for ages. He very nearly said so, glancing over his shoulder at Greggie. How could

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the boy look worse than before? But he did. One arm was dragging through the spring grass, and his head had an unnatural tilt. Raven had seen death many times, including with the People, and this was exactly how it looked.

He stopped and lowered the travois.

Mara saw the limpness, muttering, "Oh, shit."

Raven touched the forehead, finding it dry and not as warm. Then he felt the neck, not feeling the pulse for a few moments. It was a light, feathery beating, warning of a heart very near its end.

Mara felt her brother's chest.

"Oh, shit," she kept saying. "Oh, shit. I'm so stupid. This is my fault."

Raven stood up, trying to think. He waited for any trace of a plan to come into his head, and nothing did. The boy was dead in every way but lifeless. There was nothing to be done for him. Raven never should have helped the demon-girl, much less shown himself to her. He was a stupid, graceless boy, and he deserved whatever fate came to gnaw on him now.

From a little hollow, not even ten paces away, a man stood up.

Mara couldn't see anyone but her brother. Only Raven saw the dark, looming figure, and after a long moment, the man lifted a long arm, making a gesture that said to him, "Leave them. Leave them to me."

Raven knelt again.

Before she could react, he snatched the knife from Mara. Suspecting trouble, she flinched and almost tried to take it back again. Then he grabbed at her hair, pulling her ear snug against his mouth, whispering, "Your father's looking for you...how...?"

"Everyway," she started.

Raven pressed his free hand against her mouth, demanding quiet. Then he said, "From the sky, he watches...how...? In the night, like this...what can he see best...?"

Raven used his knife, touching the blade to his own neck and slicing through the old string. The charm fell to the ground, and he left it there. Then he stood, feeling as visible as any demon. Hopefully One-Less wouldn't notice how easy he was to see. In the People's language, he called out, "They are mine. Not yours. And I will get us rid of them."

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"What'd you say?" Mara asked.

"Nothing," Raven lied. "I was just scaring off a bear."

He lifted the travois and turned, starting for the river. "We can cool your brother in the water," he promised. "And you can get a drink and rest, and later, we'll start again."

A hiding figure watched from the hollow, saying nothing.

"Hurry," he told Mara.

One-Less had wanted to lure them to the river's edge. His plan was probably to drown them in a hole and sink their bodies where only the turtles and catfish could find them. He probably thought that was what Raven was doing now, and he could see no reason to intrude.

Bouncing on the travois, the little brother whispered, "Daddy."

Raven felt tight inside, almost sick. What else could he do? He studied the flat ground along the river, measuring the trees and young grass. Then they reached the water's edge, and looking across, he found what he wanted.

"It's too deep here," Mara said.

Raven dropped the travois and pulled his knife from its sheath again, and with a quiet strong voice said, "It's not that deep. Take him out there."

"No," she said.

He kicked Mara's legs out from under her. When she climbed up again, he waved his knife before her nose, saying, "Drag him into the water now. Or I'll gut both of you."

Wearing a panicked face, the demon did as she was told.

Raven started to follow, and then paused, watching for movement and smelling the cool night air. The travois helped the dying boy stay afloat, and Mara was wading up to her waist, trying to hold him steady in the current. She sounded sick with fear, gasping and sometimes crying. Raven splashed after her, the water cold enough to burn. Watching from above, their warm bodies would look like little fires against that chilled water. A good father would see his little son lying on his back, made bright by the fever that was killing him.

Raven walked beside the travois, controlling it with a hip but pretending not to touch it.

In the middle of the river, the current spilled over a shallow bar of sand.

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"Stop," Raven said, standing only calf-deep. He made certain that the travois was resting on the sand, safe from the current. Then for a second time, he gave the big knife to Mara. "If he comes out after you — "

"Your father."

"Keep the knife hidden." He showed her how to hold it under the water. "Kneel down, and when he gets close, cut the tendons above the heels. That will cripple him."

Mara stared, eyes like full moons.

Raven turned and quickly splashed across the last of the river. On the far bank, maybe twenty strides back from the water, someone once planted a row of junipers as a windbreak. They had grown tall and shaggy, each crowding the other until they were halfway dead. Behind the trees stood a square house that must have been empty for years, its roof sagging and its front door lost. The house might be better than the trees, thought Raven. But when he ran under the branches, gathering up tinder, he saw a sparrow roosting on its little nest. The bird fled with a dusty explosion of wings. For just a moment, Raven glanced into the river, seeing only Mara standing downstream from what looked like a pile of driftwood. As fast as he could, he used his steel and flint, throwing sparks into the abandoned nest, coaxing the first feeble flame to grow and feeding the sad little blaze until he heard the first shrieking cry for help.

Instantly, Raven ran back to the water.

He saw One-Less but not Mara. The man was standing in the middle of the sandbar, stomping at the water, acting as if the river had just insulted him. Raven kicked and half-swam, and then the water was shallow enough for him to run again, and he forced his way up to where he could see One-Less using his foot and his weight, bearing everything down on the face of a dying girl.

"Stay back," said the man.

Raven stopped short, watching.

"In old times," One-Less said, "we used to do this sort of thing. Now and again, you know. To keep the People secret."

Mara fought her way from underneath his foot, coming up coughing. Her bother still lay on the travois, alive by a whisper and immune to everything that was happening around him.

Deciding to use his hands now, One-Less bent over. He grabbed the

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black hair and shoved at the struggling face, forcing it back under the water. Speaking through his teeth, he said, "Little ugly deeds have always kept us alive."

He was speaking to Raven, or maybe to himself.

Raven's knife must lie in the watery sands somewhere. He came closer, feeling for it with a bare toe, and then he bent low and groped with both hands, calling out, "She's important, this demon is."

"Bounty is a big name," One-Less agreed. "I bet you don't have any idea what that name means to the demons."

"Let her go," begged Raven.

"No."

"You have to," the boy said. "Or her father will come find her and then get his vengeance — "

One-Less turned, meaning to push the noisy boy aside.

Mara came up coughing, and she kicked blindly, and perhaps One-Less thought again about the best way to do this ugly thing. Reaching for his own knife, his hand closed on air and water spray. Where was that knife? He slapped at the sheath and then started hunting for it in the water, and then he didn't seem to feel quite right anymore. He paused, as if trying to make sense of how he felt, and then he noticed the familiar hilt of his beautiful demon knife standing in his back, the bright long blade shoved up inside one of his kidneys, an astonishing amount of blood already pouring into the chilled water.

On the shoreline, the line of old junipers was exploding into flame.

Again, Mara kicked at her attacker, and she sat up, panting until she had the strength to crawl over to her brother. Raven stood up and then thought better of it. He knelt down low again, finding his own knife and sliding it back where it belonged. He felt empty and old, and sad, and very manly, and just awful. In the sky toward dusk was a single light, brilliant as twenty suns and moving, following the course of the river. He heard nothing but the water running, and then he heard a great engine roaring in the distance, and he looked at Mara, saying, "You never saw me. Please. You never saw me or this man."

One-Less had stumbled off the sandbar and into the quickest, deepest water. Gazing downstream, Raven tried to picture where a man's lifeless body would catch on a snag and stop drifting.

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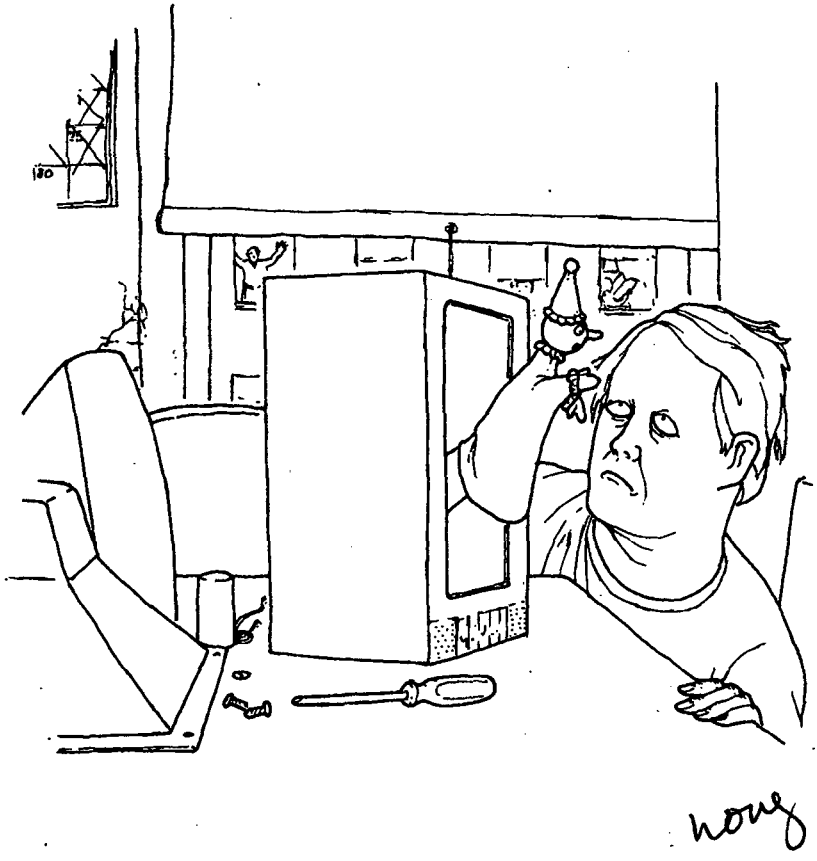
That ugly work could wait another moment, he decided.

"Keep me secret," he begged.

Mara wrapped her arms around her little brother, and she looked at Raven, not quite smiling when she said, "All right."

But he wasn't there anymore.

Somehow, she and her brother were alone on this nameless river, and she couldn't see any reason for telling her story any other way.



"You ought to get out more, according to experts."

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Book of Dreams, by O. R. Melling, Penguin Canada, 2003, Cdn $22.

O. R. Melling's latest novel is a sequel to the three books that were collected in 2002's wonderful omnibus *The Chronicles of Faerie*:

The Hunter's Moon, set in Ireland, in which Gwen Woods has to rescue her cousin Findabhair from the King of the Faeries;

The Summer King, in which Laurel Blackburn, still dealing with the death of her twin Honor, comes to Ireland, where she discovers that her sister might still be alive, only in another world;

And *The Light-Bearer's Daughter*, in which Dana Faolan, hurt by her father's decision to move them to Canada, takes off into the fairy mountains to look for her long-lost mother.

The new novel, set in Canada, continues Dana's story, and while characters from all the books show up, we are introduced to a whole new cast as well, easily as varied and fascinating.

At this point I want to emphasize that while, as in most series that feature an ongoing cast of characters, familiarity with the previous books will certainly enrich the reading of this new book, that familiarity is in no way essential to appreciate *The Book of Dreams*. Melling does a great job of introducing the repeat visitors and their backgrounds without ever bogging down the current storyline.

And what a joyful storyline it is, though when I say joyful, I don't mean that it's saccharine. Bad things happen to good people, and there's certainly tension. Dealing with Faerie requires sacrifice, and some of the characters pay dearly. What I mean is that there isn't an underlying meanness to the book, something I find increasingly evident in novels that are marketed as

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fantasy, but are in reality simply military books disguised as such.

A war is unfolding in *The Book of Dreams*, and there are skirmishes and battles, but the focus is on the characters, not just the struggle, and the magic is wild and unpredictable, full of wonder, instead of being presented to us as weaponry schematics.

As the book opens, Dana is still upset about her father's having moved the family from Ireland to magic-less Canada. But being part faerie, she does have access to her mother and the otherworld until, one day, all the gates to Faery are sealed and even that is taken away. It's at that point that the task is put before her to find the Book of Dreams and reopen the gates, and it's also where the fun begins.

Dana's quest takes her throughout Canada, from the East Coast to the West and up into the far north, along the way gaining her new friends, allies, and enemies. Anyone interested in the mythology of North America, particularly that of Canada, will find it a fascinating trip. In Melling's capable hands Inuit and French Canadian folklore comfortably rub shoulders with Chinese dragon lore and the fairies of Ireland.

This is Melling's most mature novel, showing a real growth in her already formidable ability to get under the skins of her characters and to craft prose that both sings and carries the story forward without pretension.

Highly recommended. And if you can't find it in your local bookstore, try some of the online Canadian booksellers.

The Spiderwick Chronicles, Book 4: The Ironwood Tree, by Tony DiTerlizzi & Holly Black, Simon & Schuster, 2004, $9.95.

And speaking of series books, in the case of the latest in the Spiderwick Chronicles, you'll definitely want to read the others first since this is basically one story being doled out to us in six parts.

In this installment, Mallory has disappeared and it's up to her younger twin brothers, Jared and Simon, to rescue her. In terms of story, Black does her usual first-rate job of keeping things moving at a good pace, leavening the proceedings with equal parts whimsy and darkness. But what I found myself enjoying mostly this time out was the repercussions the Grace children's fairy adventures have in their real life, such as when Jared uses his pen knife (with its iron in the blade) to ward off a nasty

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fairy, only to then get in trouble for pulling a knife on what appears to be just another kid in the school halls.

There isn't time to follow up on that in this installment, but I'm sure Black will next time out and I'm eager to see how she reconciles the issue since nobody but the Grace children appear to actually see the fairy folk for what they are.

Reading this from a galley, I got a special kick out of seeing DiTerlizzi's unfinished sketches that were used in lieu of finished art (because, one presumes, he was still working on the art when this galley went to press). I won't say I like the sketches more than the finished work, but I certainly appreciate his art more now, seeing the energetic pencilwork from which it grows.

The Chesley Awards, by John Grant & Elizabeth Humphrey, Artist's and Photographer's Press Ltd., 2003, $45.

Considering the steady stream of anthologies centering around the winners and nominees of the Nebula Awards that we've seen over the years, it's nice to finally have a collection of work from their artistic counterparts, the winners of the Chesley Awards.

The awards were founded in 1985, named in honor of Chesley Bonestell, and the book presents us with the winning art and samples of work by the recipients of the Artistic Achievement Award for each year through to 2002.

Beyond the appreciation of artistic skill and design work showcased here, readers will also enjoy what amounts to a walk down memory lane as they get to revisit the cover art of some of their favorite books from the past few years, with many of those titles now considered classics in the field.

Along with the authoritative text of the editors, we're also given artists' bios and their personal comments on most of the art presented in these pages.

The Lost Girls, by Laurie Fox, Simon & Schuster, 2004, $23.

My first thought as I started this book was, why hadn't anyone done some variation on this before? Perhaps they have and I just missed it, but it strikes me that in the almost hundred years since the story of Peter Pan and Wendy first appeared, someone would have wanted to tell what happened to Jane, and even Wendy herself in the after years of the Big Adventure.

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Well, now someone has. Laurie Fox gives us not only Jane's story, but the stories of five generations of Darling women, from the original Wendy to her great-great-granddaughter Berry.

The Lost Girls is narrated by Berry's mother, also named Wendy. This second Wendy came late to the fairy tale that rules the lives of the Darling women. She was thirteen when the Boy came to take her to Neverland and had already lived through her parents' divorce, her mother's bohemian take on the world, and being ignored by a father who, like many of the men drawn to the Darling women, never grew up.

Wendy is particularly hurt by the Boy's broken promise to return, spending much of her life trying to come to grips with the confusing question of whether or not she, and the other Darling women, have truly had this extraordinary experience of flying to Neverland, or if they're not all a little mad the way the medical community perceives them to be. Her way of coping is to lose herself in the writing of children's stories and to marry her own childman, a musician who appears to carry in him equal parts of the Boy and Wendy's distant father.

When she has a daughter of her own, added to the confusion is why, with all the love and support she gives Berry, does her daughter instead embrace a self-destructive, unhappy life for herself?

Fox does an admirable job in showing how all these different women — and in the case of Berry, a teenager — deal with the Pan myth. She weaves J. M. Barrie's version into updated variations of her own to create a pocket world where they all fit snugly together. At times fascinating, at times infuriating (by which I mean in how some of the characters react and cope), *The Lost Girls* is the book I've been waiting to read since I first encountered Peter Pan. I just didn't know it.

And if you're a little rusty on the classic itself and want to brush up on it, I'd like to recommend a new version published last year as part of Tor Books' Starscape line. The words are the same as they are in every edition, but this one also sports a delightful abundance of art by Charles Vess. It's a book, he tells me, he's always wanted to illustrate, and that shows in every piece of the art that he's done for it.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

ELIZABETH HAND

Troll Fell, by Katherine Langrish, HarperCollins, 2004, $15.99.

Novelties and Souvenirs: Collected Short Fiction, by John Crowley, Perennial/HarperCollins, 2004, $13.95.

Olympic Games, by Leslie What, Tachyon Publications, 2004 $14.95.

THE children's fantasy landrush of the last few years has resulted in a very few great books (Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*), quite a few good ones (such as Jonathan Stroud's *The Amulet of Samarkand*), some cynical ones (Eoin Colfer's *Artemis Fowl* novels, which uncannily replicates the experience of being trapped in a movie theater watching *Die Another Day* with a bunch of ten-year-old boys, while simultaneously being forced to reread the most tedious bits of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*); and even a stinker for the ages — Flavia Bujor's *The Prophecy of the Stones*, which deserves a place in the Pantheon of Legendary Badness alongside the musical adaptation of *Carrie* and that classic film clip of Leonard Nimoy singing a song about Bilbo Baggins while surrounded by dancing teenyboppers in hippie garb.

Many of these books are distinguished by the now-familiar tropes of contemporary fantasy: British setting, donnish sorcerers, protagonists (usually male) hovering somewhere on the cusp of puberty, safe within that retrograde Neverland where their female counterparts flit across the landscape like benign versions of the Vivian Girls: plucky, cute, two-dimensional figures. Nothing's necessarily wrong with any of this; it just gets tiresome after a while, especially as the authors' jostling for originality and cleverness — sorcerer Disraelis! leprechauns

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with AK-47s! — itself becomes much of a muchness.

So it was with mild surprise and growing delight that I picked up *Troll Fell*, an utterly charming, captivating debut novel by English writer Katherine Langrish. A disarming amalgam of Scandinavian folklore, adventure, and legend, *Troll Fell* opens with young Peer Ulfsson watching his father's funeral pyre. Beside him is Loki, "a rough haired, flea-bitten brown mongrel — all the family Peer had left." In just a few paragraphs, Langrish limns a sharp portrait of Peer's grief and horror as his father is consigned to the flames, and by page three, a huge, shadowy figure has stomped into the circle of firelight in Peer's village, and Langrish's story takes off at breakneck speed.

The gigantic figure turns out to be Peer's Uncle Baldur (uncle only by marriage: there's troll blood in the family, never a good thing). Uncle Baldur proceeds to sell off all of Peer's belongings, claiming the boy's meager fortune, then drags Peer off with him to where he lives near *Troll Fell*. There Peer finds things even worse than he anticipated — Baldur has an identical twin named Grim, just as appalling as his brother. The two live in a broken-down old mill with their monstrous dog, Grendel, whom they use as a cudgel to break Peer's spirit: Any sign of rebellion on the boy's part and they'll feed his beloved Loki to their immense pet. Fortunately, Peer finds companions — Hilde, a girl from a neighboring farm whose father has gone a-viking; and a Nis, a disconsolate household spirit who lives in the barn, and whom Peer rehabilitates by feeding him a bit of butter in his porridge. The Nis, called Nithing, retains its charm despite, or perhaps because of, a powerful resemblance to its recent fictional forebears — Lloyd Alexander's Gurgi, William Mayne's Hob, J. K. Rowling's Dobby — and Hilde is reminiscent of Alexander's Princess Eilonwy. Indeed, *Troll Fell* reminds me throughout, in tone and warmth of characterization, of Alexander's 'Prydain Chronicles, though it lacks the epic scope of those books. Which is not (for me anyway) at all a bad thing. Langrish's novel has the humor and scale of a tale told before a blazing fire on a night when the sleet slashes against the window and one can too easily imagine something scurrying around the rafters: something benign, one hopes, that can be pacified with a pat of butter. The scary parts — involving an ambiguously malevolent water-spirit named

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Granny Greenteeth, those malign twin uncles, and their plan to usurp Hilde's family farm — are genuinely scary, and there's a marvelous set piece at the end, when Peer and Hilde make their way into the heart of the Troll King's realm.

I read *Troll Fell* aloud to my eleven-year-old son, a discriminating audience who often functions as the canary in the coal mine when I'm trying out new fantasy authors. His response almost every night when we finished a chapter (or two, or three) was, "This is really better than the last Harry Potter, isn't it?" "Yes," I said; and our one regret upon finishing *Troll Fell* was that we now have to wait for the next book by Ms. Langrish to appear.

SPEAK, MEMORY

I first heard of John Crowley when *Little, Big* was reviewed in the *Washington Post* in 1981; a most intriguing book it sounded, but I immediately forgot its title and author, recalling only that the book was written by a man whose last name began with a C. I spent the next five years diligently searching bookstores and reading any number of writers — Richard Cowper, Jack Cady, Jonathan Carroll — with a growing sense that I had really missed something: like failing to get the phone number of the handsome stranger met on a train, or not buying stock in IBM when offered it by a sharp older cousin. This sad state of affairs was remedied in the spring of 1986, when for the first time I took a writer's workshop. On the first day the instructor, Richard Grant, handed out photocopies of a story and told us our assignment was to read it before the next session. I began to do so immediately, ignoring the class's discussion of the work-in-progress by a retired GS-12 engineer; and felt the hairs on the back of my neck rise. The story was "Snow." The author's last name began with a C. I still didn't know the title of the novel I'd read of years before, but I had that uncanny, almost supernatural sense of immanence I've had only a few times in my life, of a door opening and being ushered through it, into a place that I've always dreamed (and suspected; hoped against hope) was there, and finding it so. I read "Snow," and went through the door, and never looked back.

Novelties and Souvenirs gathers most of John Crowley's short fiction (the brilliant 2002 novella "The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines" is not included, presumably so that it can serve as the

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cornerstone for a future collection); fifteen stories, including "Snow," "Novelty," (an incipit for Crowley's *Ægypt* sequence of novels), "The Reason for the Visit," and the award-winning novella "Great Work of Time." Some of these were originally collected in the volumes *Antiquities* and *Novelty*; all have been previously published; all are marvelous, though some are more marvelous than others.

The term "Great Work of Time" could be applied to Crowley's work as a whole. Certainly the stories in this new collection, when read all of a piece, share a concern with the permeability of time, and the role memory takes in reshaping past experience, in effect creating a new world with each instance of recall. To some degree, the past is a trope in almost every story. "Antiquities" is an account of the peculiar "plague of inconstancy" which overtakes a rural English town when ancient mummified Egyptian cats are used as fertilizer. In "The Reason for the Visit," Virginia Woolf (by means never made explicit) is summoned to the apartment of a young man in New York some decades after her death, where "she began to invent a life for me, as everyone says she often did...." The Aickmanesque "Her Bounty to the Dead" can be read as a tale of revenants as much as of an irruption in time; "Missolonghi 1824" recounts an encounter Byron has with the imprisoned Pan. "The Green Child" and "An Earthly Mother Sits and Sings" are comparatively straightforward adaptations of well-known folktales. "Great Work of Time" is one of the best time travel stories ever written, deserving a place alongside H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*. And "Snow" is, for my money, simply one of the best stories ever written: a heartbreaking, elegiac discourse on the nature of memory and loss, couched within a deceptively simple narrative involving a technology that records then plays back the random, trivial minutiae of an individual's daily life.

"Deng Fa-shen had always said it, and anyone who traveled in them knew it to be so," Crowley writes in "Great Work of Time"; "the imaginary futures and imaginary pasts of orthogony are imaginary only in the sense that imaginary numbers (which they very much resemble) are imaginary. To a man walking within one, it alone is real, no matter how strange; it is all the others, standing at angles to it, which exist only in imagination."

This is as good a description as

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any of what it is like to inhabit a novel, as writer or reader; another of Crowley's themes, beautifully manifested in *Engine Summer*, *Little Big*, and the *Ægypt* books. Earlier in "Great Work of Time," another character observes

> "History.... Yes. Of course the possible worlds we make don't compare to the real one we inhabit — not nearly so well furnished, or tricked out with details. And yet still somehow better. More satisfying. Perhaps the novelist is only a special case of a universal desire to reshape, to 'take this sorry scheme of things entire,' smash it into bits, and 'remold it nearer to the heart's desire....'"

The "land of heart's desire" is invoked in "Her Bounty to the Dead" as well; it's the shadow-text in Crowley's work, as it is the shadow-world to our own. It is the Past, as perilous as those "faerie lands forlorn/beyond the dim, endragoned, dreaming sea," where one can drown in nostalgia or grief.

"The phrase Novelties & Souvenirs entranced her with their trochaic lilt," Nabokov writes in *Lolita*; trochaic referring to the Greek dimeter, but also containing the echo of troche, a circular pill or tablet taken as an anodyne, its shape derived from trokhos, the wheel. "We live in Time, and it wounds us," someone wrote. The tales collected in *Novelties and Souvenirs* are far too intelligent, subtle, and heartbreaking to act as anodynes for what ails us, and at any rate, there is no cure for age and loss and the siren call of the Past; none that I know of, anyway. Again and again Crowley's work puts us on Time's wheel and spins it; but we are not broken there.

HERA AND ZEUS DIVORCE

Finally, there is *Olympic Games*, Leslie What's delightful first novel. What's publisher cites Thorne Smith's novels as an inspiration for *Olympic Games*, but I found this new novel to be far funnier, clever, and more touching than Smith's *The Night Life of the Gods* (though I would be perfectly amenable to whatever occult act might bring back *Topper*'s Cary Grant to play a role in the film version of *Olympic Games*). Leslie What deftly and with great humor and grace weaves a story involving Hera, Zeus, an Oracle, a short-order cook,

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a naiad-turned-dryad-turned-door, a sweet-natured savant, and a beautifully evoked outsider artist (among many others). *Olympic Games* spans ancient Greece and the Parthenon Diner, a magical rural village in the Catskills and present-day New York City. The gods have day jobs and complicated love lives, just like us: this is *Sex and the City* with the city resembling New York in *Little, Big*. There is a lot of sex in *Olympic Games*, far more graphically and hilariously described than in Thorne Smith: if Hollywood folks were ever blessed with a single brain cell to share among their sweet l'il punkinheads, actresses would be lining up to play What's Hera —

> "What's your name?" she whispered.
>
> "Francois," he said, nearly as breathless as she.
>
> "Ever been love slave to a goddess, Francois?" she said.
>
> "No, Madame. The pleasure has not yet been mine."
>
> "There's gotta be a first time for everything, don't you agree?"
>
> Francois nodded. "Tell me what you would like for me to do," he said.
>
> "Oh, don't worry," Hera said with a laugh. "I'm not at all shy. You'll never need to ask if it's as good for me as it is for you! Because if it isn't, I'll kill you."
>
> From his wry smile she knew he thought she was kidding.

There's a great punch line to all this, but I can't really get into it here; as Andy Warhol used to say, it's too dirty. And if that doesn't sell you on this book, how about this: yesterday I had an absolutely miserable day — I had no running water, my power went out, my computer crashed and could only be repaired at great expense; on top of all that, it was my birthday, and everyone forgot.

But then I stayed up till midnight to finish reading *Olympic Games*. And when I finally put the book down, I felt as though Leslie What had sent me a present. This is a wonderful novel; it may well become a cult classic, right up there with *The Night Life of the Gods*.

I have just one question: What will Ms. What send me next year?

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Much of Mr. Cowdrey's short fiction is set in his hometown of New Orleans, but last month he gave us a tale from inside the Beltway. Now he takes us farther afield, off to a planet called Bela that has seen its share of troubles lately. This story, along with his soon-to-be-published novel, should fix the name of Albert Cowdrey firmly in the minds of all enthusiasts of good science fiction adventure tales.

The Tribes of Bela

By Albert E. Cowdrey

DOCUMENTS ASSEMBLED *by the Honorable Committee Investigating the Tragedy on Planet Bela, and JUDGMENT Thereupon.*

Item (1.) *Extracts from the Notebook of Kohn, Robert Rogers, Colonel, Security Forces.*

I feel like I'm diving, not landing.

Bucking headwinds, the freighter's shuttle fights wind and rain until we drop out of the overcast over a blue-black sea. We're heading for a small rocky headland that juts out of a dim coastline.

The green duroplast shuttleport looks like a large fake emerald set in a broken ring of foam. The retros sear the pad, and clouds of steam boil up. As the sole passenger, I'm allowed to exit the ship before its rusty handling bots begin loading. An army of shiny ingots — gold, titanium, metals I don't have a name for — stands to attention, scoured by rain, awaiting the outward journey.

Two moronic guards (male & female) named Vizbee and Smelt retrieve my luggage under the baleful eye of Julia Mack, Captain, Security.

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My local counterpart salutes and I say falsely that I'm glad to be here. Smelt comments, "You may be glad now, but you won't be for long."

Vizbee adds, "Oughta give this goddamn swamp back to the Arkies."

"*QUIET!*" trumpets Captain Mack, and without further comment, the guards stow my things in a little flyer waiting in a hangar with airfoils retracted. Climbing in, I feel the four or five extra kilos I weigh here — also taste a fizzy, champagne-like something in the air. Maybe the extra oxygen will help me carry the extra weight. Or maybe just make me drunk.

Welcome to Planet Bela, old man.

We're barreling toward Main Base over fog-shrouded cliffs, through a squall blowing in from the ocean. Mack thinks it's all beautiful.

"Born here," she proclaims, her voice overfilling the cabin. "Only human that ever was. Against company policy, of course; Mama was on the pill, but something went wrong. Folks died in a mining accident and the colony raised me. Now, with these murders, they're talking about closing down the mines. People say we're going home — but for me, this *is* home."

"If I can help you catch the killer," I tell her, "the mines will stay open."

The smell of disbelief mingles with the odor of mildew from her uniform and lacquer from her regulation black wig. Christ, what a huge woman — must weigh close to ninety kilos. Yet not flabby. Her haunch pressed against me is solid as a buffalo's.

We turn west — or is it north? — above the estuary of a wide river where it swirls into the sea, spreading crescents of foam. A pod of enormous sea creatures rises all together, like dancers, and submerges again. I spot the gleam of tusks. Then we're skating in toward a cliff covered with a cluster of domes, semiplast storehouses, and connecting corridors like chicken-runs.

Whoa...what the hell?

Beneath the clutter lie huge blocks of stone shaped and fitted together like a puzzle. Did I come four-point-something light years to find the Incas have been here before me?

"Welcome to Zamók, Colonel," says Captain Mack, expertly bringing us in to a landing on the gray circle of a rain-slick pad.

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* * *

As a boy I loved listening to the adventures of old Navigator Mayakovsky — the Explorer of a Thousand Worlds, as one of my textbooks used to say in the clear neutral voice I still hear in dreams.

He named this one Bela, meaning white. When I saw it from space, I thought the reason was the clouds of water vapor that make it glow almost like Venus. But I was wrong.

"Some information for you," says Mack, handing me a memory cube as we stand at the Entries and Departures desk. I plug it into my notebook and listen idly while an autoclerk enters my essential data into the colony's mainframe.

The cube tells me much I already knew. About Bela's wildly eccentric orbit. About the 241 standard years it takes to make its awesome trek. About its endless seasons, whose radical heat and cold result from the orbital path, not the tilt of its axis, which is only about two degrees. Earthlike features: It rotates west to east and its day is 22.7 hours, which ought to be easy to adapt to, even for somebody like me (I have trouble with circadian rhythms).

Then the cube recites the text of Mayakovsky's original report. The great Russian arrived in late winter, finding the skies ice-blue and clear, the surface a white wilderness — hence the name. His scanners spotted an artificial shape and he investigated and found an abandoned city.

"Who could have built this huge stone platform and the lovely temples that bedeck it?" he demanded. "This world is dead. Beings like ourselves, alien wanderers, must have built this place. But why, in this endless Antarctic?"

He named it *Zamók*, the castle, and the unknown builders *arkhitektori*. Hence the slang term Arkies.

Exploring the castle led to a nasty encounter with carnivores laired in the temples. At first the species seemed merely interesting, a rough parallel to the Earth's polar bears — and what Russian doesn't like bears? So that was the name he gave them, *medvedi*.

"Their long fur changes from dark to white as they move from shadow to sunlight," murmurs the cube. "Tusks and claws are formidable."

Then a blizzard blew in. With complete white-out at seventy below and all bioscanners inoperative due to cold, the beasts ambushed an

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exploring party. "Two crewmen dead. Skulls crushed. Another vanished, probably eaten. A dangerous degree of cunning and intelligence in these animals."

That of course was a mere incident. The ores his deep metal-scanners found brought the mining cartel. The miners bulldozed off the lovely temples and built the current trashy hovels instead. Meantime winter had ended, and Bela turned out to be anything but dead. Thousands of species swarmed out of hiding and billions of seeds and spores sprouted, to thrive until summer arrived and turned the surface into a howling desert.

A banal thought: How fragile life is, and how tough. Once it gets started, seemingly it can survive anything.

At this point I have to turn off the cube. The local doc's arrived, a tiny energetic Chinese woman named Anna Li.

She puts me through the usual mediscan. Odd business she's in, meeting so many naked strangers — probably wondering later on, when she sees them clothed: Is this the guy with the birthmark on his butt?

I tell her I'm not bringing in any dreadful diseases, unless being over-the-hill is a disease. She smiles automatically, pays no attention.

"You're okay," she says, studying the printout, "but stay off sweets." Then dashes away.

When I'm dressed, Captain Mack takes charge again, leading me through bilious green corridors crowded with people in gray coveralls. Name tags echo all the tribes of Earth: Jiang, Grinzshpan, Basho, Mbasa, Jones.

To my surprise, my quarters are in the executive suite. A comfortable bedroom, an opulent private bath. On a broad terrace outside, the Inca-like stonework lies bare and gleaming in the rain. The view over the river valley to the distant mountains would be spectacular, except for a heavy steel screen that obstructs it. What look like maggots are inching their way around in the wet.

"Somebody'll bring your luggage," Mack tells me. "Security Central's right next door if you need anything. Like your suite, it has two doors, corridor and terrace. The Controller will see you in the morning after you've rested."

She turns to go. But I've got a question: "What's the screen out there for?"

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Mack frowns. "Mr. Krebs used to sleep in here, until somebody fired a missile at him. Fortunately he was in the Security office chatting with me, and he wasn't hurt."

"A missile?"

"Just a shoulder-fired job," she says defensively, as if a small missile makes you less dead than a big one. "Some disgruntled employee. That's when we put the screens up. There's one in front of the Security office, too."

"Was the missile stolen from your armory?"

Mack glares and says, "Yes."

"And where does the Controller sleep now?"

"Someplace else."

She closes the door firmly, leaving me to rest as well as I can — in the middle of a bull's-eye.

Supper's in the dining hall. Mack guides me to the head table in a private room. I'm hoping to see Mr. Krebs. But the Controller dines alone.

Instead I meet a dozen or so executives and engineers. English is everybody's second language, and I listen to a babel of accents expressing fervent hope that I can find the killer. His current score is nineteen dead — almost two percent of the population of 1,042. Dr. Li again bustles in, wearing a laboratory smock, and tells me she has holograms of the bodies and all the autopsy data. I can see them after dinner.

"Hope you've got a strong stomach," says the senior engineer, a guy named Antonelli. Making a face.

"Actually, there's not much mess," says Li. "Always one blow through the top of the skull with a sharp instrument. Odd way to kill someone, but it's silent and effective."

"Any particular sort of victims?" I ask. "Men or women, old or young, homs or hets?"

"No. If somebody was trying to wipe out a statistical cross-section of the colony, you couldn't get much more variety. True, they're nearly all young people. But that's just demographics."

Right. Mining colonies are like that: a few seniors to run the show, many young vigorous people to do what's often hard and dangerous work.

"There is one pattern. The crimes all happen here," puts in Captain

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Mack, who up to this point has sat silent, stuffing her face. "Never at the mining camp. For the first time, people are volunteering for extra duty at the mines."

A grim chuckle goes around the table.

When the meal's over, I ask Doctor Li to introduce me to the younger people. I stroll through the main dining room, shaking hands and gazing into a kaleidoscope of faces having nothing in common but under-thirtyish freshness. These youngsters probably all think of themselves as larval executives, here to punch their tickets, then home to climb the promotion ladder. I wonder how many will make it.

A few minutes later, I'm walking with Anna — we've quickly gotten on first-name terms — down a chicken-run leading to her clinic. When we're halfway through, she stops and says, "The first killing took place right here."

"*Here*?"

We're standing in the middle of a perfectly blank, empty corridor about twenty meters long — windowless, well lit and devoid of the slightest concealment. I ask about the victim.

"A woman named Cabrera. Athlete — good runner; life's so dull here that anybody who doesn't take to drink takes to athletics. She could've escaped, I'm sure of it, if she'd seen him coming."

"What was she hit with?"

"Probably a mountaineer's pickaxe — short handle, easily concealed. The point penetrated the longitudinal fissure of the cranium and sank about seven centimeters into the midbrain. Cabrera lived a few hours in a comatose state, then died."

"Does the killer have to be a man?"

"Not with all the girls who take martial arts classes. We're outnumbered by the men and there'd be a rape a week if we couldn't defend ourselves."

"You're implying that not all miners are gentlemen?"

"They're gentlemen in about the same proportion that cops are."

A woman of spirit, I see.

•

Item (2.) *From the Written Report of Anna Li, D.Sc., M.D.*

This person met Robert — Colonel Kohn — on the evening of his first day on Bela.

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I remembered nothing from doing his mediscan except that he was uncircumcised. At dinner I noted that he was a large man with prematurely white hair.

Our initial talk was useful, I think, in helping him understand the situation here on Bela. He seemed interested in the data I was able to show him. Whether he was intelligent I could not at first decide, though he spoke like a cultured man. I admit that intellectual arrogance is one of my grave flaws. We professionals always look down a bit at policemen, whatever we may claim to the contrary.

When he left, I locked the laboratory door. I had begun investigating a common worm or larva, hoping that unraveling the structure of its genome might provide a model for later work on Bela's more complex and interesting creatures.

Wishing the colonel well in my thoughts, I settled down to quiet, enthralling work that took my mind far away from corpses and those who make them.

Item (3.) *From the Notebook of Colonel Kohn.*

The cool voices of clocks are announcing midnight, but of course it doesn't feel like midnight. I'm ready for bed but not, it would seem, for sleep. The old brain keeps cycling in the dry tedium of fatigue.

I'm glad I had this chip implanted in my larynx so I don't have to speak out loud to record my thoughts. You never know who's listening. The technique is somewhat like ventriloquism, and not hard to learn. All the rubbish from my stream of consciousness winds up in my notebook, buried deep in a coded memory.

Anna's pictures are moderately gruesome and not very helpful. Mack's notes on the murders are much the same. The killer's efficient. The MO's bizarre. The victims are anybody.

The crimes began in the corridors, shifted briefly to the hydroponics nurseries, then everywhere. Joggers were struck down on running trails, late workers in machine shops and offices.

Even after Mack issued orders that people were not to go anywhere without a companion, the killings went on. A woman was using a toilet stall while another stood guard outside. When she tried to open the door, it hit an obstruction that proved to be her friend's body.

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Customary methods of investigation have failed. Tests for occult bloodstains, hair, and fibers turned up nothing. The colony lacks the equipment for sophisticated psych tests. Mack's methods have been rough-hewn; after the first crime she grilled everybody, eliminated those with solid alibis, then arrested three people who lacked them.

The results were not happy. After two more murders, the suspects had to be set free.

Now *everybody* has an alibi for at least one, and usually for several, of the crimes. No trace of the weapon has been found. Despite the prevalence of mining engineers, it wasn't standard issue; somebody whose hobby was mountain climbing might have brought it in their personal baggage. Mack's computers have searched personal-baggage invoices as far back as they go, but found no record of such an implement.

The stone platform under our feet is seamed with narrow passages. When stories sprang up about alien killers, the Controller first ridiculed the notion, then ordered Mack to explore. Almost any adult human would be too big to go down there, so she used a bot.

The memory cube contains a few images of wall paintings it found down below — the first ever seen of Zamók's Arkies, little hunchbacked brownish bipeds with three-toed feet and gourd-shaped heads and serious dental problems. But no sign of any recent presence except the scat and bones of small animals.

None of this surprised Anna. From the circumstances of the crime, she'd already concluded that the killer, like the victims, must be human....

Oh, hell. I'm still trying to sleep, but no luck. Just too tired, and the old brain keeps churning.

Seeking air, I put on a robe and open a thick transplast door onto the terrace and edge around the screen. A tremulous roar rises from the river. A few chilly raindrops are falling. Thunder grumbles among distant hills.

The air tastes good up here — phytoplankton in the sea and greenstuff in the jungle are hard at work excreting the poison gas we love to breathe. I can feel my heart beat a bit faster. I suppose when you're down in the jungle among all the rotting stuff, it stinks. Most jungles do.

My bare feet are cold — forgot to pack slippers. The blocks of stone are smooth and slick. Little worms squish nastily underfoot. I cross the

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terrace to a low parapet and look down. Lightning flickers on a dense black jungle lining the riverbank below. Then I smell something like the lion cage at a zoo —

Aghh!

Phew. Rude shock.

Let me catch up. Light was emanating from the Security office and I'd turned that way and was padding along toward it when somebody flung open the door, pointed an impact pistol at me and yelled, *"À bas!"*

I hit the wet stones just as a shot whanged by. I twisted around in time to see something big that had been coming over the parapet tumble back and vanish.

Feeling better now. I'm in Security and a young guy in uniform is offering me a towel, which I need.

"Sir," he says politely, "I don't think you ought to be outside at night. Wild ahn-ee-mahls sometimes climb the walls."

A skinny little watchspring of a guy with a blue chin and dancing black eyes. His English is fluent but sometimes original. He's Security Officer Lt. Michel Verray.

All around us monitors are blinking and humming to themselves. A voyeur's dream of heaven. In one bedroom, a tumultuous pile of bedclothes suggests a couple trying for a little privacy as they make love. One of the least interesting scenes — an empty bedroom — is my own.

Michel is Captain Mack's only full-time assistant at Main Base. He calls her, with ironic inflection, Maman.

"Here, Colonel," he says. "Let me give you a key to the security office. I'm sure Maman wants you to have one. And I'll sign you out with a pistol."

We chat while completing this transaction. I heft the pistol, check the load, press the recognition stud until it memorizes the pattern of capillaries in my hand. Hi, pistol. Hi, Colonel.

We chat some more. "I presume she's not really your mother?"

He makes a comical face. "Non. But I think she would like to be."

If he's right about that, it's the first sign of human feeling I've noticed in Mack. Michel shows me around, explaining that the monitors were installed after the early killings.

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"We try to persuade people to keep to areas under surveillance. I wish we had more equipment. We don't have enough cameras and anybody could be prowling the dark areas, looking for a chance to attack."

"Do people complain that you're spying on them?"

"They did at first. Not so much now they are scared. Anyway, we spy on ourselves, too. There's my room, with my roommates. And in that one you will be thrilled to observe Maman reading in bed."

Mack has her wig off and her hair is close cropped. She looks like Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein. I ask if the dozen or so weapons in the rack are the only ones in the colony. No, of course not. The Security people —Mack and Michel and Vizbee and Smelt — all carry guns. So does Mr. Krebs and Senior Engineer Antonelli and one or two other top dogs. In fact, everybody wants one, but Mack's resisting and so far Krebs has backed her up.

Damn right, too. Armed civilians can be more dangerous than the murderer.

"How about the missiles?" I ask.

Michel grins, knowing what I'm thinking. "All five that remain are here locked up, and only Maman has the key."

"I suppose the attack on the controller made her look bad."

"The whole situation makes her look bad. She gets grimmer every day it goes on. She may look like Mont Blanc but actually she suffers from the stress. And refuses to take the medications Dr. Li offers her."

Michel fetches a bottle of cognac and two plastic cups from a supply room. The drink lights a welcome fire in my gut. We chat and soon get chummy. It turns out that Michel did the exploration of the subsurface passages.

"You built the bot?"

"Non. Miners already had them to explore places too narrow or dangereuse for people. Call them Spiders [he said speed-airs] — little guys, walk on three legs, carry a digicam and an HI-light. I guided it through the passages, made Maman a memory cube and sneaked a copy for myself."

He shrugs, rolling his eyes upward in comic alarm. "Boy, she'd be pissed if she knew that."

"Why?"

"Like many mamans, she's difficult. She thinks knowledge is power. Okay, she's right. She wants to know everything that goes on here. Okay,

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that's her job. But she also wants to monopolize information, store it up to use against her enemies."

"She has enemies, then."

"Mais oui," says my new friend cheerfully, tossing off the last of his drink. "Everybody but me and Krebs hates her comme la peste."

Like the plague, eh? Well, I never imagined she'd be wildly popular. Michel's becoming franker (and also Frencher) as he absorbs alcohol. While he refills our glasses, I ask, "What do you want the cube for, Michel?"

"When I get home, I want to get a degree in Alien Civ and start teaching. I've started going over the cube frame by frame, and I think I can get my whole tay-seize [thesis?] from it. Le bon Dieu didn't mean me to be a cop," he added, then blushes, thinking I may take this as an insult to my profession.

"I agree with God," I assure him solemnly, and say good night. Now armed, I cross the terrace without incident.

Good kid, I think, turning in. He's saved me a lot — my life, plus a ton of post-mortem embarrassment. Wouldn't that have been a fine terminal note in my personnel file? *On the first day of his last assignment, KOHN, Robert R., COL, SN 52.452.928, contrived to get himself eaten.*

Good night, all. And pleasant dreams.

Morning comes with rain, thunder, lightning, and a nasty shock.

Early on I'm summoned to Krebs's office. Captain Mack pounds on the door and, when I stagger out with eyelids still stuck together, leads me in grim silence through a labyrinth of corridors.

We're somewhere deep inside Main Base when we reach the new executive suite — so deep that the noise of the storm has faded into silence. Clearly, Mr. Krebs does not intend his quarters to be hit by any more missiles if he can help it.

His office is large, blank, and ugly, and so is the occupant thereof. Mack withdraws without a word and a spongy, grim-faced man leans forward in a tall executive chair and gives me two weak-feeling fingers to shake.

The chief feature of his face is a jaw like an excavator. His lower right canine sticks up outside. His gut billows over the edge of the desk, but his arms are thin and look unused. I typecast him as the perfect executive, a

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fat guy with a stone behind, good for nothing but giving orders to people smarter and stronger than he is.

"You'll be going in half an hour," is his greeting.

"Going where?"

"Why, to check the body," he growls, relapsing against the back of the chair. "Take Li with you. Third-rate doctor, but she's all we've got."

"There's been another killing?"

"Mack didn't tell you? Goddammit, I got to do everything around here. Yeah, it's at Mining Camp Alfa."

"The first at a mining camp."

"Right. Now these cowardly shits I got working for me won't want to go to the field at all. They all think they're here to eat company food and punch their tickets and do as little work as possible."

I begin to see why somebody might fire a missile at Mr. Krebs. He seems to have a similarly unkind view of me. He sits there glaring for a few seconds, then demands suddenly, "Are you piggybacking on my budget?"

Sticking his jaw out even further.

"No. HQ pays me and the mining cartel reimburses them."

"Well, thank God for small favors," says Mr. Krebs. "The dead guy was nobody special. Another small favor."

That ends the interview.

I collect my notebook, put in a new battery and meet Anna outside her clinic. She has an overnight bag full of specimen bottles and a medical chest, which I carry for her.

"I met your boss," I tell her as we hasten to the pad.

"To know him is to hate him," she says. "Hurry up, only one flyer's working and this is it."

Ten minutes later we're taking off into the very teeth of the storm.

What a flight. It lasts one hour or one eternity, however you choose to look at it. The damn black box piloting us has been programmed to take the most direct route — misplaced notion of fuel economy, I suppose — and that involves crossing a wide bay full of churning black water. A squall is barreling toward the shore, and we fly directly into it.

I feel sure the lightning's going to fry the black box and send us careening down into the sea. Haven't had breakfast, so there's nothing to come up except, of course, my stomach itself.

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Anna takes all the pounding and shaking stoically, or seems to. Still, I notice she too heaves a sigh of relief when at last we leave the bay behind and bounce down onto another rain-scoured concrete circle near another clutter of domes and sheds.

"Well, here's Alfa," she says.

People come running with umbrellas — yes, real Earth-type umbrellas — but of course we get soaked anyway. Two dozen people are stationed here, but three guys are away fixing a slurry pump, whatever that is. So I get introduced to twenty live people and one corpse.

The latter is a young man named Thoms. He's lying facedown on the poured-stone floor of the machine shop. At first glance the only difference in MO was the fact that he'd been hit on the base of the skull instead of the top.

"Weapon appears to have penetrated the posterior median sulcus of the medulla," Anna tells her notebook.

But then she puts on a headset with a xenon lamp and high-power 3D magnifier, lowers the lenses over her eyes and kneels down, her nose almost touching the dead man's blood-stiff hair.

When I help her up, she's frowning."The wounds at Zamók were punched through," she mutters. "But this time...the wound's not nearly so neat. As if the weapon flattened on impact. I'll have to check when I've got the body back at the lab. Help me turn him over."

Somehow, handling a dead body has a calming effect on me. When I first see a corpse I'm always shocked, even after so many years of looking at violent death. But when I handle the body and feel that special weight, especially — as now — with rigor setting in, I know I'm dealing with earth and stone, not a person, and I can treat it like any other forensic exhibit.

Superficial examination shows that except for being dead Thoms's body is not, as Anna puts it, remarkable in any way. After taking a bunch of holograms, we bag it and the miners help us put it in their freezer.

The rest of the day I spend in a small, bare office with a single monitor bleeping on a chipped duroplast desk. I'm sipping coffee, noshing on bad sandwiches covered with some kind of ghastly synthetic mayo, and interviewing survivors.

Nobody saw or heard anything. Thoms was well-liked, with no known enemies, and every single person at Alfa was under observation by

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others at the most probable hour of death, which Anna puts between 6.30 and 8.00. I reach the last name on my list before Madam Justice lifts her blindfold and peeks at me.

The witness — named Ted Szczech, pronounced Sheck — is a pale, twitchy, skinny kid who looks about sixteen and wears coveralls that could serve him for a tent. He shuffles into the room carrying an envelope.

"I've uh, uh, uh, got something for you, sir," he stutters.

"Oh yeah? What?" Bad food plus no progress has put me in a foul humor.

Ted spends the next five minutes tripping over his own tongue. The story gradually emerges that he worked with Thoms in the machine shop and so was the first to spot the body. Before sounding the alarm he ran for his digicam, rightly anticipating that everybody in Alfa soon would swarm in and obliterate every clue.

"Why didn't you bring me the pictures at once?" I demand in my growliest voice. Actually, I'm impressed by his initiative.

"I w-w-was w-w-w-waiting my turn," Ted explains. "And uh, uh, uh — "

"What?" I say, beginning to pull the printouts from the envelope.

"Well, you can see the f-f-f-footprints pretty clear."

"Footprints!"

"Yeah. They showed up when I used the infrared flash. Standard light don't show n-n-nothing. I never even knew they were there until I p-p-p-printed out."

I stare at dim little three-toed marks around a corpse so fresh that under black light it still glows with the warmth of life. In the early morning the stone floor was cold and the killer's body heat created just enough transient warming for the cam to register.

"It probably ran away when you started to open the door," I comment. That seems to scare Ted.

"You think so?" he asks, eyes bugging out. "You really think so?" Not a single stutter.

When I show the pictures to Anna, she looks ready to tear out her graying hair. "Oh, great Tao. We got it *settled*. The killer has to be *human*," she moans.

"Okay, a human did it. And then Threetoes walks in, trots over to body, trots away again and disappears into the jungle, and — "

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My voice dies in midpassage. Anna looks at me. I look at Anna. We're both remembering where we've seen three-toed feet before.

"We'd better get back to Zamók," she says. "Now."

The storm's abated and the trip back is a bit tedious, which certainly was not a problem on the trip out. Lying behind us wrapped in translucent plastic the corpse reminds me unpleasantly of a giant fetus swathed in its placenta.

Back at the Castle we hump our gear across broad puddles and down gray corridors into Anna's lab. I retrieve my infopack and we check the pictures the Spider took underground. And yes, the Arkies have three-toed feet that resemble Ted's blurry images.

While I make tea on a hotspot under a vacuum hood, Anna calls Mack and asks for the memory cube containing the full exploration of the subsurface passages.

"You're not authorized to see it," that ungracious woman growls.

"What do you mean?" snaps Anna. "I've got top clearance. I need it for the work I do."

"You're a penis machinist, not a security officer. You don't have a security-type clearance."

At this point I step forward. "I'm cleared for everything you are, Captain, and a lot more. Send that goddamn cube and send it now."

That makes me feel pretty good. Pulling rank may not be nice, but it's effective.

We relax until Michel appears with a sealed container, for which Anna and I both have to sign. He gives me a wink, then heads back to his job. A couple of minutes later, she and I are head to head, staring into the image box of her computer.

The solid-looking forms jounce, steady, fuzz out, clarify. We're entering a narrow slot between two of Zamók's cyclopean stone blocks. We descend steep narrow steps. The high-intensity light swivels back and forth, its movement complicated by the robot's walk. Anna's forever freezing a frame here and there so we can get a fairly clear picture.

Along walls of smooth stone marches a painted procession of Arkies wearing fantastic outfits of skins and feathers. Projecting teeth give their heads a spiky appearance. At the foot of the steps a narrow corridor splits

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left and right and the robot begins to explore. Passages divide and subdivide and it pokes into small rooms covered with garish paintings that make me think of Mayan art at Tikal and Dzibilchaltun.

It's all quite fascinating and, as far as our current problems are concerned, absolutely useless. When the show's over, our tea has gotten cold. "So what's your conclusion, Colonel Sir?" asks Anna with ungentle irony.

"An alien — " I begin.

"The Arkies are natives," she corrects me. "We're the aliens."

"Okay, okay. First of all, you were right. An Arkie couldn't have done the killings at Zamók. You turn around in a corridor and see a strange creature, you run, you scream, you fight back, you do something the victims didn't do. The killings here were done by a human. So we have an anomaly."

We sit staring at each other. Feeling around helplessly in my empty head, I ask, "What do we know about the Arkies?"

She gestures. "What you've seen."

"I mean — " I don't know what I mean. "How'd they survive in this world? It's so bizarre, radical cold, radical heat, seasons that last for decades...how'd they get along?"

She sighs. "Nobody knows. We're like a pimple on the body of the planet. We came here with typical engineer's tunnel vision, to dig and smelt and ship the ingots home and follow them when the mines play out."

She spends a while reheating the tea, then goes on: "I'm as bad as the rest of them. Spend my days doing routine physicals and treating orthopedic injuries from the mines. That's where the crack about me being a penis machinist comes from. And there's truth in it. I try to do some real science after hours."

"Anything helpful?"

"For solving the murders? No. On the contrary — it's as far as possible from anything to do with them. I'm trying to get a start on understanding the molecular biology of — "

"Oh," I say. "Okay."

"Anyway, you asked me how the natives fit into their world. Answer: I don't know how anything really functions on Bela. We're all so busy being practical that we don't have time to be intelligent."

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So we give up; I send Michel the info we gathered at Alfa, and then we go to dinner.

Replay of last night — Mack feeding her face, the engineers eyeing me, wondering if I know something they don't about the latest atrocity. To avoid questions I don't want to (meaning: can't) answer, I avoid socializing, say good night to Anna and as soon as possible drag my aging butt off to bed.

Through the door to the terrace I see that another storm's moving in. The cube says the "spring rains" are scheduled to last about forty standard years. What would Noah say to that?

Hit the hay but again can't sleep, this time because the lightning keeps waking me up. Cursing, I get up and start searching for a way to darken the window.

Lightning flashes. Inside the screen a monster stares at me.

Lightning flashes. I stare back. Oh come on, it's only an animal.

But it's impressive. Standing upright, bowlegged, body covered with rough fur of indefinite color. It's a boar, by God — a huge two-legged boar. The hairy ears, the little red eyes with startling piggish intelligence in them — and the tusks, two down and two up, dirty orange but rubbed white where they cross each other — and especially the flat snout, quivering, with the hairy nostrils spread....

And then, of course, I see it's not a boar or anything else I've ever known. Long claws instead of trotters. Muscled forelimbs adept for walking or climbing. Imagine a big bear crossed with a swine, crossed with...what? Something.

In the dark this triumph of natural genetic manipulation claws at the thick transplast with twenty-centimeter talons that make a nerve-jangling skreek. Lightning flashes. It exposes the full length of its twelve-centimeter tusks and turns away, frustrated.

Lightning flashes. The animal's gone.

Somewhat shaken, I continue my search, find a switch on the wall and touch it. Yes, praise whatever gods may be, the window darkens. I go to bed again and try to fall asleep.

Processions of feathered creatures march through my head, tracked by two-legged pigs and by Mayakovsky's *medvedi*, the bearlike animals that ambushed his people seventy years ago when it was wintertime on Bela....

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Why do all these strange critters seem vaguely alike?

Item (4.) *From the Written Report of Li, Anna M., M.D.*

I spent that evening in my laboratory, meaning to work on my project. But my mind kept drifting to the body in my freezer.

At length I gave up, dragged poor Mr. Thoms onto an examining table, and began to explore his wound. Almost at once I found something odd.

Perhaps I should have called the Colonel at once, but I decided he was probably asleep. So I promised myself to speak to him at breakfast, not realizing that tired as I was after our adventures of the day, I might oversleep and miss him in the morning. And that is exactly what happened.

Item (5.) *From Colonel Kohn's Notebook.*

"So," says Mr. Krebs, champing his jaws, "what've you learned so far?"

His windowless office gives me a feeling of premature burial. The man himself, with his piranha profile and billowing stomach and weak little hands, manages to look dangerous and helpless at the same time.

"Who do you think tried to hit you with a missile?" I respond conversationally. This is a question I (literally) dreamed up last night, when the old subconscious finally did something useful.

"I want answers, not questions."

"Well, I don't have any, yet. But you haven't just had twenty murders here. You've had that plus an attempted assassination of the colony's executive head. I'm curious as to whether there might be a connection."

He growls. Literally — grrrrr. Like a dog.

"Talk to Captain Mack," he says. "That's her department."

"I'm surprised you've kept her in such an important position after all the things that've gone wrong here," I say frankly.

"I trust her absolutely."

I take this as an admission that anybody appointed in her place might use Security's armory to try to kill him — again.

"Now, if you don't mind answering my original question, what've you found out about *the murders*?"

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I open my notebook and set it humming. Briefly I outline the events of the day before. At the end I summarize, "The Arkies have joined the fun."

"But they're all *dead!*" he almost yells.

"No more than Mayans or Egyptians or Celts or Cambodians or any of the other builders of abandoned cities on the Earth are dead. They just moved away. Their descendents live on. Spring brought the Arkies out of hiding, and what did they find? Their Acropolis, their temple mount, had been desecrated by aliens — us. That pissed them off, and they've just killed their first human."

I think that's kind of a neat theory — much too neat to be true.

"You're saying none of our people killed anybody?"

Patiently I explain the difficulties in trying to blame the first nineteen killings on the natives.

"So you're telling me we've got two killers, in two different places, killing people in the same bizarre way, and one's a human and other's a whatchacallit. That's the dumb-assedest notion I ever heard."

"Sir, you've summed up the problem," I tell him. "The evidence is unreasonable. *But it's still evidence.*"

The rest of the interview's a total waste of time. We just yell at each other, accomplishing nothing. A supply ship's due pretty soon and I guess he'll send me home, as he's authorized to do. That will make both of us happy.

Needing time to cool off a bit after the shouting match, I set out to find Anna's lab and promptly get lost.

I don't know if I've made this clear, but Main Base is a hopeless maze. The buildings were put up at different times for different purposes out of whatever materials were at hand. Meanwhile the population increased to a high of two thousand or so and then declined as mines were worked out and abandoned. Now a dozen buildings are permanently vacant, and a tangle of corridors lead here and there with no rhyme or reason, often ending in blank walls where an abandoned structure's been sealed off.

Adding to the general confusion, about half the people are absent at any one time. Some at mining camp Alfa — the only site that's presently active — the rest at the smelter, or exploring for new sites. Then they come

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back to work at administration or housekeeping. The idea is to train the youngsters in all phases of running a colony.

But that also means they rotate in and out, causing ceaseless turbulence. I've got a near-photographic memory for faces, and yet I've never seen many of the people I encounter.

Two I do recognize are Vizbee and Smelt, the guards from the shuttleport, who must have rotated back. Vizbee's as near insolent as he dares to be. "Enjoying Bela, *Sir*?" he asks with a nasty smile.

At least he's learned the word sir since I saw him last.

"You're looking a bit lost, *Sir*," Smelt chimes in, with a washed-out smile. Someday I will deal with this pair.

Actually, getting lost turns out to be one of the more useful things I've done. I've been dealing with facts, which are fine as far as they go. Now I'm getting the feel of the situation, too. The killer's been hunting his victims in a kind of indoor jungle. Add the fact that he doesn't seem to care who gets bashed as long as somebody does, and the bloody orgy becomes comprehensible.

I spend a couple of hours wandering, asking directions, finding the directions don't work, and getting lost again. Periodically I come across a sealed window and look out on the river valley. Or a landside enclosure with high fences and shrouded machinery on duroplast skids. Or a big cube sprouting thick cables — the main generator, a primitive fission-type reactor. Bela, I perceive, is run on the economy plan.

But I can't get out, and soon I'm wandering the maze again like a baffled rat.

Finally admitting I'm lost for the nth time, I ask directions from a pretty dark-haired engineer named Eloise. We chat, and she invites me to visit her room, explaining that she and her boyfriend are "on off-rotation" — awkward phrase — from the mines.

The boyfriend's named Jamal, and he's solidly built and dark and bitter as a cup of Turkish coffee. He and Eloise share a very cramped room, which they consider themselves lucky to get. I ask why space is so tight when, with all the empty buildings, it should be just the opposite.

"Mack says it's for security," growls Jamal. "Stay where the cameras can watch your every move, including when you shower and make love. I can just see her and Krebs lying in bed — incredible as it seems, a lot of

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people think they sleep together — and peeping at us like the swine they are."

My own impression is that Mack and Krebs are both asexual beings, but I don't argue the point. Instead I remark that morale in the colony is close to rock-bottom.

"It's dying," says Jamal, now sounding weary rather than bitter. "Everybody hates the leadership and everybody's scared to death."

I'm sitting with Eloise on the edge of their bed. Jamal is sitting on the floor.

"See, you haven't been here the last two years," he goes on. "You look at the number of victims and think, 'Oh, well, ninety-eight percent of the people are still alive.' But when you live through a campaign of murder, the effect is cumulative. I never leave El without wondering if I'll ever see her again, and she wonders the same thing about me."

She strokes his coarse black hair and nods. She has an inner stillness that he completely lacks, yet she backs him up.

"It's been hard," she says simply. "I'm sure nobody will want to come here again, and everybody who's here already is counting the days until they can leave. Bela will have to be abandoned."

She's less bitter than he is and makes an effort to be fair, even to Mack, whom everybody else blames for their miseries.

"She's in a terrible situation. If she's afraid of anything, it's having to leave Bela. I'm sure she's doing her best to find the killer, and I'm not sure anybody else could do any better. I mean, how do you catch somebody who doesn't care who dies as long as somebody does?"

"Some goddamn maniac," Jamal mutters.

"I don't think so," says Eloise thoughtfully. "The killing's random, yet at the same time it's calculated and deliberate. It's...cold. Somebody's aiming at something, and it can only be to drive us all away."

"Why would a human want to drive humans away?" asks Jamal, and neither of us has an answer.

There is, of course, the big exception — Thoms's murder. My hosts haven't heard about that yet. But the conversation starts me brooding about it once again.

Feeling a strong urge to revisit Alfa, I thank the young folks and ask them to show me an exit to the pad. They do so, and my luck's in, because

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on the pad the flyer's revving up. It's a dull trip, and everything seems normal until we arrive.

Then I ask for Ted Szczech, and learn that he won't be taking any more pictures. Ever.

No, he didn't die by the customary head-bashing.

Less than an hour before, something resembling a two-legged boar grabbed him when he was outside working on a stuck valve of a slurry pipe, and dragged him away — presumably to eat.

They're getting up a search party to try and recover his remains. I ask to go along and they say sure.

As I'm suiting up, a call comes in from Anna. She's been hunting me, called Michel in the security office and asked if I was on any of his monitors. He told her he'd seen me with Eloise and Jamal, so she called them and they told her they'd seen me catch the flyer. Then Michel called her back and said he needed to see me, too.

Funny, all you have to do to get popular is to go away.

Anna's full of her latest discovery. "Last night I found bronze fragments embedded in Thoms's skull. I'm not set up to do metallurgical analysis, so I asked one of our engineers to check the fragments out."

"Why?"

"I think the bronze was smelted by some very crude, primitive process. The alloy's soft and that's why the skull did almost as much damage to the weapon as it did to the skull. Or maybe it was meant for use on a softer, thinner cranium."

"In short, it was made by an Arkie to smack other Arkies and the hardness of the human head took its wielder by surprise."

"Something like that. When are you coming back?"

"They're sending out a party to search for Ted Szczech, and I'm going along. A wild animal got him."

"Great Tao. What kind of animal?"

I describe it.

"Oh, that's *Ursasus terribilis*," she says.

"Meaning?"

"Terrible bearpig. I started doing taxonomy on the local fauna, giving Latin names and so on. Then stopped, because it seemed so futile. Oh, poor Ted."

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"We may find him yet."

Somebody's yelling for me. Michel will have to wait.

We put on transparent rain gear, the kind that breathes so you don't drown in your own sweat, and water-repellent goggles. We're all armed to the teeth. The flyer takes off to circle over the search area. Nobody's expecting it to find anything; the jungle's too full of big organic molecules that confuse the bioscanner.

Down below, it's exciting at first — walking in the deep wet woods of Bela. Up to now its green/blue/purple colors seen through misty rain didn't look especially strange. Close up it's a crawly place. Everything drips; every step squishes. Vines are in motion, like the hands of an antique clock; you can't see them move, but if you look away and look back, yes, they've changed.

The trees form short, twisty lattices of rope-like growths with trunks not much thicker than limbs. No large trees — there's been no time for them to grow yet. Leaves of all shapes stretch up and out toward the little light that's available, ruthlessly shading each other out so that the understory is choked with masses of dead and rotting vegetation.

No flowers. Everything in monotone. Things buzz around that look like flying crayfish. In glimpses of the sky, we see dashing small shadows that somebody on my intercom calls daybats. Hunting the crayfish, I suppose. Now and then I catch sight of an elaborately feathered creature crawling through the branches with its beak and talons, like a parrot.The usual little white worms are crawling around the wet ground, millions of them. My feet squash them at every step. I begin to feel like I'm walking through the innards of a dead, decaying beast. Even through the filters in my breathing apparatus I catch whiffs of decay, not quite like decay on Earth; a sharp touch of ammonia, stench of methane, a gagging bubble of — what? Chlorine? Plus that smell like a lion cage I sniffed before on the terrace at Zamók.

Lasers hiss in the murky air and slashed limbs fall smoking to the ground where the wet extinguishes them. The ground's like a spongy mattress and I sink knee-deep at every step. Soon my legs ache and my knees are quivering. We circle the whole camp, finding nothing.

Ted's just gone. Period.

Back at Alfa, I'm bushed. Fall on somebody's cot and snooze for about

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two hours. When I awaken, one of the guys tells me Zamók's been buzzing me.

"Why didn't you wake me up?"

"Easier said than done, old-timer. You were *out*."

First time anybody's called me old-timer to my face.

I stagger to the nearest monitor and press the return-call button. Michel's image says he'd like to see me as soon as possible. I call his code but get only his image again, promising to return my call at the earliest possible moment.

I have ersatz coffee and another plastic-mayo sandwich and think it over. If Michel wants to see me, why hasn't he called again and why doesn't he answer my call?

I call Captain Mack and ask if she knows where he is. She's looking, if possible, grimmer than usual. No, he's off duty until tomorrow. Where's he sleep? Impatiently she gives me the code for the room he shares with two girls and another guy. I call and his roommates are there, but he isn't. I call Anna and ask her to look for him.

"I'm waiting for the analysis of the bronze."

"Look for Michel, please."

I go to Alfa's commandant and ask to borrow the flyer. No, he says, it's on a regular schedule.

When will it be going back to Zamók? Tomorrow noon, he says. Thank you, I say.

I walk out onto the pad and find a tech just finishing his service routine. I tell him Hi, and when he goes back inside, I climb in and tell the black box to take me to Zamók.

"Hearing and obeying," says the gadget.

"Accept no calls from any source until we arrive," I add.

"Hearing and obeying," says the gadget.

I settle back in the seat and wonder how I can explain snatching this machine if, after all, Michel meets me alive and well.

I needn't have worried.

By the time I arrive he's been found, and Main Base is in the state of an overturned anthill.

As startling as the murder itself is the way it was done: Michel Verray

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has been shot in the back in the same chicken-run where Cabrera's body was found almost two standard years ago.

There was no approach, no hands-on attack. An impact slug was fired from the far end of the corridor. His beltpouch has been roughly opened, breaking the catch, suggesting robbery. His pistol's missing. Was he killed with his own weapon?

A scenario flits through my mind: Michel confronts the killer, draws his weapon, has it knocked out of his hand — maybe by somebody who's been taking those martial-arts classes Anna talked about. He turns and runs away, and the killer picks it up and coolly takes aim and shoots him....

But I'm not even sure he was running when he was shot. Mack thinks so, but the holograms she took of the body seem ambiguous to me. A runner hit from the rear in midstride on a smooth surface slams down and slides. I think the abrasions on his face are insufficient for that. I'd say he was hurrying but not running, and Anna's inclined to agree.

In her clinic she starts crying, the first time I've seen her do so. She has Michel's body on her examining table, and it's a horrible mess. As usual with that type of ammo, the entry wound near the spine is the size of my little finger and the exit wound through the chest is the size of my head. The slug, of course, disintegrated as it's supposed to do, leaving no evidence.

"Even Mack's shaken up," she tells me when she's cried on my shoulder. "I saw her when they brought the body in, and she looked paralyzed. She kept saying, 'Oh no. Not him. Oh no.' He was kind of a substitute son, you know. Now she's really alone."

Well, murder gets to the toughest of us, sooner or later.

Anna washes her face at a laboratory sink and says dolefully, "I have to do the autopsy."

"Not now, you don't. Tomorrow's fine. Michel won't run away. Come on, I'll help you put him on ice."

I hate to touch the body, but as soon as I do, it's okay. Michel is gone; the good mind, the lively wit, the Gallic accent, the future he had sketched out for himself — none of that exists anymore. The corpse is merely evidence.

We wrap it up and put it in the freezer next to Thoms. We're getting quite a collection of dead youth.

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Anna needs company, so I take her to my suite and, after I check my weapon — in case of bearpigs — we step out on the terrace.

Rain's falling in the distance, but a gap has opened in the clouds and pale sunset colors, lemon and rose, are showing. It's the first sunshine I've seen on the surface of Bela. I begin to see what this world will be like in those magical decades — between spring and summer, again between autumn and winter — when it's neither savagely cold, nor unbearably hot, nor a sodden mess. It'll be gorgeous.

For a while we stand there like a young couple holding hands. Anna needs distraction, so I begin telling her about the wet wild woods around Alfa, about the strange creatures and the restless trees. Her mood lightens a little.

"I want to do some real science here," she says. "I just won't let myself keep getting sucked into the routine. I've been doing a little work on these larvae."

She gestures at the worms crawling on the terrace. "They're all over the place and they're genuinely weird. A human has maybe forty thousand genes, but they've got five times as many."

"What, those little worms? Why?"

"I don't know. They're about as simple creatures as you could imagine — a kind of motile gut. And think about all the chances for genetic errors, for destructive variations — it's too much information."

She added, "Rather like the murders. Where we've also got too much information and can't make any sense out of it, either."

She's back on that subject now, and with a sigh I admit to myself there's no avoiding it. Now she's mourning Michel, who evidently had a gift for making older women want to take care of him.

"Such a nice young man. A little while and he'd have been headed home. It's terrible, all these young people dying."

She starts to cry again. I put my arms around her, and she's so small that for all the gray in her hair it's like holding a child. I'm just about to embark on some serious comforting when intuition — as usual — seizes an inconvenient moment to strike.

"Anna, listen. Tell me this: Why was Michel hurrying down that particular corridor?"

She looks up at me, eyes bleary, mind as usual clear. "Oh. Sure, it

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leads to my lab. You mean he couldn't find you, so he was coming to see me."

We stare at each other for a few seconds.

"Come on," I say.

"Where?"

"I just saw a ray of light. This time internal. I think I know what the killer was looking for in Michel's beltpouch. Let's go talk to his roommates."

Vengeance is on my mind.

Anna's an unusual woman. Asks no questions, just leads the way through the maze of shoddy construction. I stumble a few times because my mind's elsewhere, thinking of a lot of things that at last, dimly, seem to be making some kind of sense.

Michel's room is in an outlying building: large, clean, well-lighted; semiplast partitions between four bunks; a bouquet of artificial flowers lying on Michel's pillow.

His roommates are all drinking something with the sour smell of home brew and talking together in low voices. I ask to see Michel's belongings.

"Captain Mack took them all," says a young Eurasian woman named Jospin, who seems to be the spokesperson for the group. "She and those two characters Vizbee and Whatever practically turned the place upside down."

"She *said*," adds the guy, "that she was looking for evidence."

That starts an argument between those who say Mack was just doing her duty and those who say she was harsh and unfeeling. I short-circuit this argument.

"Listen. You all know who I am and what I'm doing on Bela. Now I need something and one of you may have it. I hope you do."

I explain what I think Michel has been killed for, and how much I need to see it if it still exists. Jospin looks steadily at me, then reaches into her beltpouch and takes out a pillbox.

"For PMS," she explains with a faint smile. She shakes out, not a pill, but a memory cube and hands it over.

"He asked me to hide it," she explains. "He said not to give it to anybody. He didn't say why."

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"I don't know why either," I tell her. "But I hope to find out. Many thanks, and" (speaking as impressively as I can) "don't...say...*anything* about this."

In Anna's lab we play the cube and, yes, it's the copy Michel made for himself of the Spider's exploration of the subsurface passages of Zamók.

"We've seen this already," says Anna, disappointed.

"But perhaps not all of it."

As before, we settle down head-to-head to watch. Once again the little robot descends a slot half a meter wide. Once again pictures of garish creatures in bizarre attire wobble past. We enter familiar rooms, leave them, walk three-leggedly down corridors, enter other rooms.

I'm beginning to get worried. The trouble with intuition is that until you test it, an error looks just as convincing as the truth.

"I don't see anything n — " Anna's beginning when I yell something, maybe "Shit!"

We both stare breathlessly at the screen.

The Spider is entering a room we've never seen before. Slowly it pans the walls and ceiling with its HI-light. We're looking at a sacrifice. As with medieval paintings or comic strips, a series of scenes tells a story.

Unlike our Aztecs, the Arkies had metal weapons, the favorite being an implement with a long handle ending in a curved blade on one side and a spike on the other. With one of these gadgets a priest ceremoniously sacrifices one of his own kind to whatever gods he believes in.

The method is familiar; a fatal blow delivered with the spike against the back or top of the head. Only he does a follow-up, splitting the skull with the axe, after which the believers gather to eat the brain.

The victims don't seem to be resisting; light streams from their faces and rainbows encircle them with full-spectrum haloes. Above them god figures hover, radiating light; in the last scene, they welcome the sacrificial victim to Valhalla.

"Looks like a retirement dinner," I remark unfeelingly.

"No," says Anna. "They're not cannibalizing for food. It's magic. They're acquiring wisdom. They aren't murdering anybody, not in their own minds. They've sacrificed somebody they respect, made him a god, and now the tribe is sharing his knowledge and strength — oh!"

For the second time in a few minutes she's been interrupted, this time

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by herself. As for me, I am, as they say, struck dumb. Whatever I expected to see in the underground, it isn't this.

The Spider has emerged from the room with the images of sacrifice. In the corridor just beyond, a human child is lying against the wall — a tiny, an improbably tiny girl with golden hair.

For a moment I think I'm going mad. Then Anna says, "It's a doll," breaking the spell.

And with that, of course, the whole case opens before my mind.

Anna and I are outside in the rain. We stroll to the power station with its comforting roar of turbines and its EM fields to mess up listening devices.

We lean our heads together and whisper, reviewing the evidence.

A child can get down the steps into the underground, can take her doll and a flashlight, can see the paintings.

Perhaps, surrounded by busy adults who fundamentally don't give a damn about her, she spends a lot of time down there. She meets other small beings her own size. She plays with and loses her toy.

Mack grew up on Bela, the only human who ever did.

Mack is physically powerful. She's nobody's friend, yet she represents security. Somebody, turning and seeing her coming up from behind, would feel only relief — whew, I'm safe — but nobody would stop to chat with her.

They'd turn and walk on. And feel only one stunning blow before the darkness.

Anna talks about Michel, what a terrible thing it must have been even for a mass murderess to realize that for safety's sake she had to kill the nearest approach she knew to human affection.

I'm more concerned with how she caught on to him. "I bet the kid got careless, made a copy of his cube and left the images in a backup memory, where she found them."

"Mack's insane," whispers Anna.

"No," I say. "She's a native. Like the Arkies. She's helping them reclaim their world. When we go, she'll stay here with them. That's what she really wants — to be rid of us, and stay here forever."

The rain patters around us. It's getting dark, or darker. The power station roars and shakes. My imagination's doing acrobatics.

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Suddenly I'm seeing in a whole new light that missile attack on Krebs, the one that conspicuously missed, while scaring the shit out of its target.

What if the whole episode was intended to make him feel surrounded by enemies, make him more dependent on her? And whose missile was it, anyway?

She said she was "chatting" with him in Security when it hit. She wouldn't lie about something like that — too easy to check. And I'm sure Michel wouldn't have fired it. Suddenly I'm remembering her other subordinates, Corporal Vizbee and Private Smelt.

Voilà! I think, in honor of Michel.

At last breathing all that oxygen is paying off — I'm in ecstasy, making connections, when Anna interrupts with a practical question. "What are you going to do?"

"Confront her, accuse her, arrest her. And I'm going to grab those two grungy enlisted people of Mack's. There's something I want to ask them."

"You won't get Vizbee and Smelt," she says. "They were just in to pick up supplies. Right after they helped her shake the place down, she sent them back to the shuttleport."

"Then it's Mack alone."

I'm a happy man. I'm about to crack my case and go the hell home and my ego's purring. When I get back to Earth, I'm thinking, I'll take a long vacation — preferably in Death Valley.

"You're really confident, aren't you?" she asks with an odd inflection. I peer at her, curious.

"Spit it out, Anna," I say. "This is no time to be feminine."

"Well, I think you're underestimating her. And this world. You don't seem to realize that she's not just a lone criminal. We've already had Thoms and Szczech attacked at an outstation. And think of *Ursasus terribilis* — what if the Arkies control the local carnivores? What if they've already used them twice to try to kill you?"

Goddamn women anyway. They have a gift for imagining worst-case scenarios. "If you're right, I'll have to move fast."

"When will you arrest her?"

"Now. Right this minute. Want to come along?"

As we hurry back into the maze, she's muttering, "There's something else. I know there's something we haven't thought of."

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But I'm not really listening. First I use a public machine to call Jamal and Eloise.

"Do you feel energetic?" I ask.

Jamal looks baffled. "I guess so. Why?"

"I may need a little assistance. In my room. For something important and possibly a mite dangerous."

He looks at me with narrowed eyes, suspicious of anyone in authority. Eloise comes up behind him.

"We'll be there," she says over his shoulder. I break the connection.

"Don't hurry, just in case we're being watched," I tell Anna, and we move with what, I believe, is legally termed deliberate speed through the usual throng, anonymous in spite of their name tags: Ellenbogen, Menshnikoff, Nguyen, Rice-Davies.

In my bedroom we check the terrace outside, then exit and head for Security. I try the electronic key Michel gave me and it doesn't work.

"Shit," I profoundly comment. "She's changed the settings on the lock. Stand back."

The impact slug knocks out the lock and I kick the door open. The gun rack is empty. At the same moment my eyes fall on the monitor that shows Michel's room.

Oh, Christ.

So while I was busy solving my case, so goddamn sure of myself, she was watching us, changing the lock, removing the weapons.

Did she take the missiles, too? I check hastily. One's gone; the other four are still locked in. But she's removed the detonators so I can't arm them. Who's serving this match?

All things considered, Anna's voice is remarkably calm as she says, "Look outside."

My friend the bearpig — or his cousin — is coming over the parapet. He uses his claws like grappling hooks, climbs easily despite his weight of maybe three hundred kilos. As he moves into the light pouring from my quarters I see sticking through his coarse yellowish fur a million black spines, like a hedgehog's. The guy's armored as well as armed.

He rears up, freeing his forepaws for action. Then he moves bowleggedly yet with disturbing speed around the screen and a scream tells me that Eloise and Jamal have arrived there.

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I fling open Security's door and run outside, Anna following. But before I can fire, the beast takes what looks like a tremendous punch from an invisible fist, right on the snout. He rears up, flops over and lies twisting on the Incan stonework.

The great skull is ruined. One eye stares at Anna and me with helpless rage before it films over. The body smells like the lion cage at a zoo — an acrid, sulfurous, somehow fiery odor.

I look into my room and Jamal's standing there in the approved shooter's crouch, holding a pistol in both hands, index finger on the firing stud.

"Where'd you get that?" I ask after we've all greeted each other.

"Swiped it from my boss's locker. I didn't see any good reason why the senior guys should have protection and El and I shouldn't."

"Good for you. Look, we have something of a situation here." I explain.

The four of us huddle. We've got two weapons. Each has fired once, leaving fifteen shots each. Mack's got a dozen weapons and all the spare ammo. She knows Main Base backward and forward, and however she calls her friends — those in the jungle, and those in the passages down below — she's undoubtedly doing it now.

Touching my forehead in salute, I tell Anna, "You were right. This *is* the worst-case scenario."

She's standing there as if in a trance, looking like a statue of Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy.

"There's more," she murmurs.

So much for mercy.

"I've just realized," she goes on. "The larvae. Two hundred thousand genes."

I don't understand, even though I know what she's referring to. Eloise and Jamal are, of course, looking absolutely blank. But Anna now speaks with calm professional assurance, as if she's telling somebody they need to get their triglycerides down.

"The larvae must be the basic form. They must hatch from some kind of spore with a really tough capsule to survive the extreme heat and cold. Something triggers development into different forms — partly it must be temperature, but I'm sure it's more complicated than that. The Arkies are

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one form and Mayakovsky's *medvedi* are another and the carnivore Jamal shot is another. And there may be more.

"They're all cousins, so to speak. That's how they dominate their environment and survive the fantastic changes that happen here on Bela...."

Silence follows. Then the quiet voice insists, "Don't you see?"

"Unfortunately," I say, "yes."

We try to put out a warning.

Eloise has just settled down at the huge console in Security and spoken a first word of command when a sound of distant thunder comes through the shattered terrace door and the machine and the monitors and the lights all go out.

I step to the other door, the one leading into the corridor, and fling it open. It's dark inside Main Base, almost as dark as on the wet and dusky terrace outside. Battery-fed emergency lights are flickering on and beginning to glow redly. People are standing around, looking baffled, their faces purplish as if they had lupus. I turn back with my latest bad news.

"Mack just used her missile on the power station. Zamók's been shut down. All of it."

We head into the corridor and try to spread the alarm by word of mouth. It's not easy. The maze is more confusing than ever. Everywhere people are milling around, bitching about the power failure. Many were headed for the dining hall; complaining they'll have to eat cold rations tonight.

We try shouting, telling them an attack is about to begin, telling them if they've got weapons to join us, if not go to the dining hall and lock the doors. People crowd around us, trying to decide if we're crazy.

Some of them have never seen me before. Anna they know, but so what? She's just the doc. Jamal and Eloise are too young to count.

Where are their leaders? they want to know. Where's Krebs, where are the senior engineers — above all, where's Captain Mack?

"What does Captain Mack say?" a young guy demands. "I mean, she's in charge of security, right?"

"Captain Mack has already killed twenty people and is about to kill a lot more," I inform him, biting off my words.

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The fact that I'm getting pissed off doesn't make this unpalatable news any more believable. Yet some people take alarm and start to hasten away. Even if we're nuts, the lights are out; something's clearly wrong.

Others stand around arguing. Some are belligerent — what the hell are we saying? Who the hell do we think we are? Are we trying to start a panic just because there's an equipment failure? Somebody will fix it. That's what engineers do, right?

Then comes a shout. "Doc Li! Come quick! The Controller's been shot!"

And that does it. Suddenly the *toute ensemble* gets to them. The shadows, the dim red lights, the air growing stuffy, the palpable anxiety, Jamal and me waving weapons and talking about an attack, warning them against Captain Mack — and now somebody's yelling that the Controller's shot.

So they hated him, and they hated her, so what, they're the symbols of command and control, right? If they're hostile or wounded or dead, everything's coming apart, right?

Suddenly they panic. And they bolt. They're like cattle scared by lightning. I see shadowy people caroming into one another, knocking one another down. Running into half-dark corridors, headed for I don't know where. Some for the dining hall, some bolting for cover in their rooms.

The guy who yelled for Anna fights his way to us where we stand together, waiting for the hall to clear. He's Senior Engineer Antonelli, and I met him for the first and only time on the day I arrived here. He's armed, and I'm glad to see him.

Anna asks, "Is it true Krebs has been shot?"

"Yes. I found him in his office and — "

He never gets to finish. Somewhere in the maze, people start screaming. There are roars and howls. People start running out of the corridors they ran into not five minutes ago. A chunky young woman trots up.

"Arkies are coming up through the floors," she gasps. "And there's some kind of big animal loose."

We hurry to the dining hall. About twenty people have gathered there, two with guns. They're using furniture to barricade the doors, of which there are four. The only light comes from the emergency system.

"Stay here," I tell everybody. I tap Antonelli. "You're in charge."

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"I know that," he snaps.

"Where are you going?" asks Anna.

"To snatch a flyer if I can. The only reserves we have are at Alfa, and we're going to need them."

"I'm going with you."

"No, you're not. These people may need a doctor."

"You couldn't find your way with the lights on. How about with them off?"

Eloise steps up and says quietly, "I'll go with him."

To this Jamal objects so violently that I lose patience and, while he's ordering Eloise not to move a muscle, I give him a short left to the point of his dark stubbly chin. He drops like a stone.

I tell Antonelli, "When he wakes up, tell him we'll be back with reinforcements."

In the dark corridor, Eloise says, "I suppose you had to do that."

After we've walked a few meters, she adds, "He's such a dickhead, I've often wanted to punch him out myself."

Of course Anna was right. If I'd tried to find my way out of the maze I'd have gotten hopelessly lost.

Eloise, on the other hand, turns out to be one of those irritating people who always know exactly where they are and the precise azimuth to follow to get anywhere else. When I compliment her, she says, "I'm part homing pigeon."

There's a body in the way, the back of the head caved in. It's nobody I know, but Eloise gives a little muted cry before we hurry on.

"Know him?"

"Oh, yes. Before I...met Jamal."

Something roars up ahead. I'm smelling an odor like lions. I pull her into a dark doorway and we wait. Something big lurches past, making the floor creak, thick coarse fur and spines rasping the wall with a sound like a wire brush. Then a patter of footsteps, a chink of metal and a rapid warbling as varied as a mockingbird's song, only deeper.

Everything fades into the distance. A woman screams. There's a little popping sound — an impact weapon. A roar.

Eloise whispers, "You notice something? The Cousins — that's what

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Anna called them, wasn't it? — all smell kind of alike. The big ones and the little ones. Maybe that's how they recognize their own kind."

Right, they all have the lion smell, as penetrating as burning sulfur, and why not? They all must have the same basic body chemistry. An idiot rhyme runs through my head: If you stink alike, you think alike.

The birdlike voice of the Arkies fascinates Eloise. "Maybe there's only one 'word' in their language," she whispers, "that long sweet whistle, and the rising and falling tones make the differences in meaning."

"It would be nice," I say repressively, "to speculate about that if we had nothing else to do."

We venture into the darkness, turn down this corridor and that one. Under a red light the semiplast flooring's been burst out from below. I have no trouble recognizing the narrow slot in the stonework beneath, the steps leading down. I even catch a brief glimpse of painted walls.

"You know," Eloise tells me as we edge past and hurry on, "if circumstances were just a bit different, my sympathies would be with the Cousins. It's their world...turn here."

Suddenly we're slamming through a door onto the pad and the shuttle is sitting there, completely empty except for the black box that runs it. Standing in a hangar nearby are two others: one half-dismantled, one that looks service-ready. That fact may be important. Then we're inside the waiting flyer and I'm locking the door and shouting an order to take off. The black box is perfectly calm. "Hearing and obeying," it says.

Abruptly we're soaring into light rain, and as we tilt and turn, Main Base except for a few security lights is plunged in darkness as deep as the jungle below it.

Now we're over the bay, nothing to be seen below but faint crescents of white foam as another in the endless succession of squalls blows in from the ocean. Why do I have these repetitive nightmares, and why do they all turn out to be real?

Emerging from wind-driven rain, we see Alfa's lights still on. A valve is stuck open somewhere and the slurry from the mine — pollution, humanity's signature — is gushing downslope in an oily torrent toward the bay. Eloise makes a faint sound and points.

A guy and a young woman are sitting on top of Alfa's brightly lit power

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station. He's armed, and they wave at us. There's a dead bearpig lying below. As we bank and turn on our spotlight, something flickers, an arrow maybe, and the two flatten themselves as it flies over.

I doubt that our black box has been programmed for the current circumstances, so I wedge myself into the pilot's seat, hit the manual cutoff and take control of the flyer myself. It's a cranky little machine, and I have some trouble getting it under control.Meanwhile Eloise grabs the pistol and opens the right-side door. As I start swinging back over the power station she fires twice. There's a commotion in the shadows.

"Get something?"

"I don't know. I think there was a bunch of — of whatever, getting ready to attack."

I finally figure out how to bring us to a low hover. The attitude control's stiff—probably a long time since the machine's been on manual. We tip this way and that, then steady and move closer to the shed.

Over the whine of the engine I yell, "What about the others?"

Can the answer really be, "All dead."?

Item (6.) *From Doctor Li's Report.*

This person regrets intruding herself again.

However, I have a positive contribution to make, for Colonel Kohn's absence left him without knowledge of events at Main Base during many crucial hours.

I may state at the outset that locking the doors of the dining hall proved to be impossible. Regrettably, all the locks were electronic and failed when the power went down. How we longed for an antique mechanical bolt or two!

Fortunately the doors opened inward, and piling furniture against them provided a partial defense. Almost at once the doors began to move, pushing back the chairs, tables, etc. Our enemies had no machines but an abundance of muscle, and we were hard put to it to hold them out.

Then noises were heard from the kitchens. Antonelli led a small group of us to the source. When the tiles composing the floor began to shift and then to be knocked out from below, he was waiting.

An Arkie appeared wielding a bronze axe, and Antonelli's shot went through his body and killed also the warrior behind him, who was armed

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with a sort of barbed hook. Wild scurrying and scampering followed, leaving the mouth of the tunnel empty save for the bodies.

This gave me an idea. After the corpses had been dragged out, I found that I could just fit into the passage, being quite a small person. I asked to borrow Antonelli's weapon. Instead of waiting for a new attack, I proposed to drive back our enemies. And he agreed.

So for the first time I entered the subterranean world of which we had all heard so much and seen so little. I confess that my motive was far more curiosity than any desire to kill Arkies. I believed that the passages provided them protection from heat and cold, all-weather connections between the buildings that used to stand on the surface of Zamók, as well as storerooms and robing rooms where priests prepared themselves for public ceremonies. All this proved to be true as far as it went — which was not very far!

I carried a battery-powered lamp detached from the wall. It was dim and red, and I kept watching uneasily for side chambers, where anything might be hiding. But for twenty meters the passage ran straight and unbroken. It was profoundly silent, and I guessed that our enemies had abandoned any hope of getting at us by this approach.

Then I heard noises ahead, birdsong voices that sounded strangely in these caverns. I switched off the lamp, and stood for a time in profound darkness. Then I began to see very dimly, the way one does on a clouded night — peripherally, while the center of the retina registers only a blur.

This seemed strange to me, for of course the eyes do not work where no light at all exists. There was light, then, although very little, and I soon realized that microscopic fungi lived on the walls, emitting a dim greenish bioluminescence. Thus the lamp I carried had never been essential; but when we were looking down from the kitchen, the tunnel had appeared perfectly dark.

I placed the extinguished lamp on the floor, stepped over it with some difficulty, and moved on. The pistol was heavy, and I now held it with both hands, ready for action.

My next discovery was that my shoulders no longer brushed against the walls, though I still had to bow my head. The passage was widening, and I could see an opening ahead with something moving just inside it.

I stopped at once. When the obscure movement ceased, I advanced

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very, very cautiously, well aware that as the space opened around me I would be subject to attack. The tunnel widened into a broad room, where long slabs of stone stretched away into the dimness in mathematically straight lines.

On each slab lay terra-cotta trays a few centimeters deep, and in each the familiar larvae were swarming.

This was an impressive sight. Clearly, the Arkies no longer depended on the natural development of their kind in the forest. I heard whistling and movement toward the other end of this strange nursery, saw an Arkie emerge from the dimness and post itself beside a tray. Something began to trickle, and I realized that the adult was urinating into the trays, a few drops to each, and I caught the penetrating "smell of lions," as the Colonel called it.

No doubt, I thought, the urine contains hormones which speed the development of the larvae into the Arkies' form: a most fascinating achievement for a species that, so far as we know, has nothing that can properly be called science!

Well, and why not? I asked myself. Folk medicine gave us humans quinine for malaria and inoculation for smallpox. I was full of these thoughts when suddenly the Arkie spotted me and broke into a frenzy of birdsong.

Item (7.) *From Colonel Kohn's Notebook.*

We have them aboard now, the two Alfans, and yes, everybody else in the mining camp is dead.

The technique reminded me a bit of Ted Szczech's abduction. Something broke the slurry pipe, that set off alarms, and when a repair crew went out to fix it the Cousins ambushed them. The Arkies used poisoned arrows as well as bronze hand weapons, and with the bearpigs to aid them soon forced their way inside.

The Alfans say two species fight together like humans with war dogs or war horses or war elephants. Only here there's a family connection much more direct than ours with our symbionts. They recognize each other by smell, and seem to feel a kind of tribal loyalty. There may even be a telepathic bond — the Arkies seem to give orders at a distance. They're the most intellectual members of the clan, but even the ones we

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think of as beasts are — as Mayakovsky noted so long ago — disturbingly intelligent. In fighting, the bearpigs display initiative and cunning as well as savagery.

Down below, they're dragging the bodies out into the open, into the glaring lights. The bearpigs begin to feed and the scene is garish, horrible, a kind of Grand Guignol theater. The Arkies look on, but don't share the meal. Clearly, humans are not eligible for the company of their gods in Valhalla.

Watching the butchery, I know we've lost the war. Period. We have to assume that the four of us in this flyer and the people holding out at Main Base and *maybe* the guards at the shuttleport are the only survivors. So back we go.

Item (8.) *From Dr. Li's Report.*

As I retreated down the tunnel, I could hear and sense rather than see them following me, and I fired the pistol.

The place was so narrow that I did not have to aim. Of course, neither did they. Something came sliding and scraping along the floor and touched my shoe, and it proved to be a short throwing or thrusting spear with a leaf-shaped bronze point.

I fired again. There was no use trying to evade the necessity to kill or be killed. My heel struck an obstacle and I almost fell over backward, saved only by the narrowness of the tunnel. It was the lamp. I stepped over it and continued my fighting retreat.

The sounds at the end of the tunnel indicated that bodies were being pulled out of the way. I fired again, producing much agitated noise. My heel encountered another obstacle: the first step.

It is no easy task to retreat up a staircase that is both narrow and steep, at the same time keeping one's head down and one's guard up. With a metallic ping an arrow struck the riser of a step I had just vacated and the wooden shaft broke. Then friendly hands were pulling me out of the slot, into what seemed at first the blinding light of the kitchen.

I had hardly begun to tell the others of the mysterious world beneath our feet when a deafening impact rocked us all. We stumbled over one another rushing into the dining hall, now adrift in dust and shattered fragments.

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The wounded, still shocked, had not yet begun to scream. One of the piles of furniture had been blown to bits and the door to the hall was a gaping hole.

Captain Mack had used another missile, and used it well. Our enemies were upon us.

Item (9.) *From Colonel Kohn's Notebook.*

I think the Cousins are awestruck — it's the only word I can think of. Stunned by Mack's demonstration of godlike power.

I left the Alfans at the pad with orders to rev up the other workable flyer to aid the evacuation. Then Eloise guided me to this scene of ruin.

In the dim red glow of the hallway outside the mess hall our enemies stand, small and great shadows under a forest of glinting spearpoints and axes with curved blades. Clouds of smoke and dust are billowing around them, masking shapes and distorting outlines. I bet their ears are deafened and ringing, just like mine.

For some of the animals it's too much. Frightened, they begin to lumber away, colliding with one another and the Arkies and the walls. The moment of confusion is perfect.

I can see Mack, wigless, with the missile launcher still on her shoulder. I take careful aim at her, fire, and hit a bearpig that lurches between us at the critical moment.

Then Jamal and Anna run out of the mess hall, both armed, firing too, and panic hits our foes. The coughing of the impact weapons is almost inaudible, and creatures large and small start falling over. Some scream, just like wounded humans.

Then they're running, fading into the darkness of the corridors, maybe some retreating into the underground passages until they can figure out what's going on. Mack's gone too — at any rate, I can't see her distinctive figure anywhere.

We stumble over bodies, shouting. Jamal hugs Eloise, glares at me. That left hook I gave him seems to have made me an enemy. Then Anna mistakes me for something hostile and almost shoots me before I yell at her.

The mess hall's in ruins, some people dead, some wounded, some stunned. We don't have a minute to lose, we grab the living and run. It's

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a total rout. We're like Spaniards fleeing Mexico City on the *noche triste.* Or like Americans fleeing conquered Saigon.

Eloise and Anna are leading the way through the corridors with their smears of red light, and I'm hearing our enemies roar and sing and reassemble for a new attack.

The walking wounded have to take care of themselves; the helpless ones are hauled and dragged by the shoulders or even by the feet. We've got four weapons but only about a dozen shots left, as near as I can figure.

Then we're out onto the pad. In the rainy dark the lights of the two functional flyers cast frenzied shadows everywhere. Those of us who are armed prepare to resist while the others are jamming people aboard. Two who died on the retreat from the mess hall get thrown aside like rubbish.

Anna has given her weapon back to Antonelli. She's in medical mode, doing a sort of instant triage. She orders the bad cases stacked like cordwood in one flyer so she can ride with them and try to treat them.

Meantime figures are gathering just inside the doors and arrows begin to flicker and ping. A young woman I don't know turns a frightened face toward the door of Main Base and takes an arrow soundlessly in her throat. It's short, about thirty centimeters, and it only pricks her, yet suddenly she's flopping helplessly on the ground, her face cyanosing.

We abandon her, too.

I don't really notice the last moments. All at once I'm hanging half out of the door of a flyer, there's no room inside for all of me because I'm too goddamn big, and arrows with little barbed brazen points are sticking in the skin of the machine.

I hear the black box — so calm, so cool, a voice from another world — as it says, "Hearing and obeying," and we're lifting away from Main Base.

So slowly, so slowly. And I'm riding like that, arm crooked around a stanchion, and some friendly hand's holding onto my belt as we wobble and yaw out over the estuary and the white-crested black waves of the sea.

Item (10.) *From Dr. Li's Report.*

We were packed together like rice in sushi. At first I couldn't do anything for my patients, because I couldn't move.

Two of them died right there, and with great difficulty we extracted

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the corpses and threw them into the sea, making a little more room so that Colonel Kohn at last found a place to sit inside.

I discovered that eleven of us were on that little flyer, which was built to handle four plus luggage. That it stayed aloft at all was quite wonderful. I feared, however, that the excess fuel consumption might drop us into the sea before we reached the shuttleport.

It was the darkest part of the night, and I shall not soon forget the trip. Sometimes a soft moan, the rank marshy smell of human bodies that have been sweating with fear. The odor of blood. Fortunately, the wounded were in shock from their injuries and burns, and lay quiet.

Exhaustion was our great friend, and I suddenly opened my eyes to find that I had been sleeping, and that a pale gray misty dawn had begun to filter through the clouds.

Soon every eye was trying to pierce the veils of rain for our first sight of the promontory and the egg-shaped green dome. What we would find there no one knew — whether it had been attacked, whether its two guards survived — and I was thinking also of the months that must elapse before the next supply ship came.

It is no light thing to be at war with a whole world.

And then I saw something — I saw something — I saw a smooth geometrical shape rising out of the clouds and mist, and it was still there, the portal by which humans enter and leave Bela. I thought: Oh, that we may yet leave it alive!

Item (11.) *Extract from the Bela Shuttleport Log.*

7.56. Have spoted 2 flyers approtching. Linda and me didnt hardly have time to jump out the sack and put our draws on when they come boncing down on to the pad and a bunch of peple come spiling out. Memo: file complant with Krebs re (1) unskeduled flyte and (2) overloded flyers. (Singed) Cpl Vizbee, Securty.

Item (12.) *From Colonel Kohn's Notebook.*

Vizbee and Smelt are looking pretty sour and disheveled, and give us minimum help carrying the wounded. They keep saying they take orders only from Mack and I have to get a bit rough to convince them they now take orders from me.

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We number twenty-two, of whom nine are too seriously injured to work or fight.

Brief tour of inspection shows a freezer stocked with foodstuffs for the guards and the loading parties who used to bring in the ingots. I ask Antonelli to check it out. He says that if all the wounded recover, we'll starve before the supply ship gets here.

Medicines: the shuttleport has a small dispensary, but Anna looks grim when she inventories the drug locker. I suspect Vizbee and Smelt have been into it for recreational purposes, though of course they deny it.

The port contains about three hundred square meters of floor space. Walls and floor are thick translucent duroplast — solid stuff, nothing will break in. Power source: another antique reactor housed in its own dome and accessible by a protected corridor.

Escape possibilities: We now have three flyers, but the two we brought with us are almost out of fuel — that overloaded last trip, among other things. The flyer V&B came down in is usable, with enough fuel for a return flight to Zamók, where, of course, we don't dare go. One dismantled flyer remains there — I hope beyond repair.

Outside it is, surprise, raining. The pad is wet and shining. There's a bare space, maybe half a hectare in all, where everything except a kind of lichen has been killed off by the retros of incoming and departing shuttles.

Beyond are gray rocks and clumps of stunted trees. A neck of barren land connects us to the shore and the usual gray-green-purple wall of jungle.

Situation summary: We're in good shape, with ample space, bedded down warm and dry, with lights on and medical care and nothing to do but wait for the supply ship. It's due in about sixty-seven days — local days, that is. If it's late (and it often is) we'll be living on air and water. *Lots* of water.

The first need is to increase food supplies somehow.

I call on Jamal and Antonelli to help me search the peninsula. Jamal wears his patented scowl but obeys scrupulously, which is all I ask for. We take our weapons, just in case.

We complete our circuit in under an hour. It's not much of a place. I doubt it's more than a couple of square kilometers of volcanic slag. You

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can hear the sound of surf everywhere. The beaches are gray shingle or black sand.

We walk out on the rocky neck that connects us to the shore. The water's shallow on one side where the sand has built up, but deep on the other. Could be a fine fishing spot. I'm sure we can fabricate some tackle.

I've surf-fished on coasts like this, and for a moment it all seems halfway familiar — the sea air and the smell of the deep and the sting of salt in the flying drops of spray.

Jamal turns back toward the shuttleport, but I walk a few steps on with Antonelli. He begins to tell me something, shouting to be heard over the crash of the waves.

"Sometimes I dream about retiring to an island. Just me, a good library, a wine cellar, a bot or two to do the dirty work — "

Aagh!

The deep erupts and something huge and black falls with a weight that shakes the rocks.

It's big, big as an orca, and it has broad flippers in front and four huge splayed tusks. It takes Antonelli's whole head in its mouth and thrusts with the flippers and slides back into the water, dragging him under.The wind flings a geyser of foam into my face. I wipe my eyes and the last thing I see are the man's legs thrashing deep down like the arms of a squid.

Antonelli's gone. Just like that. The kelplike odor of the deep mingles for an instant with the fiery smell of lions. Then there's only wind and salt and Jamal is dragging me away.

Behind us something big roils the surface of the sea and there's a great bellowing roar, *Aa! Aa! Aa! Aa!*

Item (13.) *From Dr. Li's Report.*

Nothing of this tragedy was audible inside the dome.

I'd done what I could for my patients and was trying to comfort a young woman named Mbasa,. concealing my fear that she might be permanently blind.

To treat this one injury properly, we needed a set of replacement eyes, fetal-monkey stem cells to regrow the damaged optic nerves, and the services of a skilled neurotransplant surgeon. We had none of the above. And there were other cases even more serious than this one.

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Then Colonel Kohn appeared in the doorway, white-faced and soaking wet. He gestured for me to follow him.I gave him a blanket, made fresh hot tea and met him in the station's departure lounge. In one corner Eloise and Jamal were hugging each other as if they never intended to let go. The colonel sat hunched over, wrapped in his blanket like a beggar, and sucked greedily at the steaming tea.

"The Cousins have a cousin we knew nothing about," he said, and told me of Antonelli's death. "The trouble with the worst-case scenario is there's usually a worser one. How are your patients?"

I replied that at least four and possibly as many as seven would not survive.

"That's good," he said.

I looked at him and saw a man who was both familiar and strange. Despite his professional toughness, he had always seemed to me a humane man. Now I was seeing another side of him. Though he still trembled with the cold, his face was bleak and hard as the rocks of this nameless island.

"It's a good thing," he muttered, "that we have a big freezer. We're going to run out of food, Anna, and we're under siege and can't get any more. Once our supplies are gone, we'll have no choice but to eat our dead."

We sat quietly together, sipping tea, while the profound depth of our dehumanization sank in. Suddenly I knew that I could not face the coming ordeal alone.

I brought him another cup, plus fifty milligrams of Serenac, which he obviously needed. There was nothing else I could do for him, except go to bed with him and hold him and keep him warm. At that moment I resolved to do so, if he would have me.

Item (14.) *From Colonel Kohn's Notebook.*

I see it's been several weeks since I made an entry, so let me try to catch up. Much has happened, also little. Anna and I have become lovers — a development that was a surprise, at least to me.

By default we've also become the rulers of our tiny besieged colony. As Anna predicted, four people have died of their wounds and two more are moribund. With Antonelli gone, that leaves seventeen of us, soon to be fifteen.

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In all we've suffered almost ninety-nine percent casualties. Even if some people at Main Base or the mining camp or the smelter have escaped into the jungle, they won't survive there long. They'll be killed, or they'll simply starve.

All the senior engineers being dead, I appointed Jamal as technical officer. His business is to keep the place working. I know he has long-term plans for revenge. I humiliated him in front of Eloise with that long-ago punch, and he's one of those people who never, never, never forget. Well, I need his brains, courage, and knowhow, and in return he can have his revenge.

Anna has the job of keeping the survivors alive. Eloise works under her and is rapidly turning into a capable physician's assistant. In bright people, on-the-job training produces quick results. I see to defense and discipline, make out and enforce the duty rosters, preside over the distribution of rations (about eighteen hundred calories for the healthy, twenty-one hundred for the sick) and act generally prickish. Like Mr. Krebs in his time, I am not beloved, nor do I expect to be.

The only serious violation of rules has been, inevitably, by Vizbee and Smelt. Ordered to turn over keys to all doors, cabinets and cupboards, they did so, but kept a duplicate set. When Anna told me that six vials of something called M2 — a synthetic morphine substitute — had disappeared from the medicine cabinet, I staged a raid and found them in Vizbee's laundry bag.

The matter was serious, because we're low on painkillers and have a lot of pain to kill. In a container of Smelt's vaginal cream I also found the duplicate keys.

My first impulse was to shoot both of them. However, Anna spoke up for mercy and the general feeling in our community seemed to be that they were too stupid to be fully accountable.

So I held a private session with each of them, offering them life in exchange for some answers.

Both babbled freely. Each blamed the other for firing that missile at Krebs's quarters. Both affirmed that Captain Mack gave them the weapon and the order, which as good soldiers they had to obey, whatever their personal feelings.

"I'm sure you understand, Sir," says Smelt with her soapy smile.

"Only too well."

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I had them sign confessions, and then I tied both of them up and put them in the freezer beside the corpses. Half an hour later I took them out. They emerged wrapped in spiderwebs of ice, and when revived seemed to have gotten the message. The next time they're going in for good, although the thought of having to eat Vizbee stew or Smelt croquettes eventually is pretty repugnant.

Aside from that, the time has been routine. We haven't been attacked. Those of us who hadn't already paired off are doing so now — most with the other sex, a few with their own. Everybody needs a companion here.

Recreation: Hidden away in cabinets we've found some chess sets, tennis racquets but no balls, a game called *Conquer the Galaxy* — excuse me, I'd rather not — poker and blackjack and Airborne Polo programs, and old sets of greasy playing cards, some of which are marked.

Daytimes we clean the place and tend the injured and service the machinery; at night we mark our calendars, make love and play games and gossip and feel hungry and bitch. And, as much as possible, sleep.

Between Anna and me there's a surprising amount of ardor, considering our mature age and marginal diet. Also a lot of caution. The conjunction of two loners of settled habits is dicey at best. And there are some physical problems, because she's so small and I'm so large. But — in sex as in life — where there's a will, there's usually a way. We've found privacy in what used to be a storeroom. I've locked the door with a confiscated key. At the moment, Anna and I are lying starkers on a pile of discarded shuttlecraft cushions, warmed by proximity and by some clean mechanics' coveralls she found in a bin and turned into bedspreads.

Now she turns to me with a smile and lets her tiny but very capable hand settle on my arm, like a dragonfly. I think this will be all my notetaking for tonight.

Item (15.) *Extract from a Letter of Eloise Alcerra to Her Mother.*

Dearest Mama, So many things have happened to us that I hardly know where to begin. First of all, there's been a war....

So that's the story to date. Now I'm working in the hospital in the shuttleport here on Bela. We only have three patients left — the others have died or have recovered as much as they're going to here.

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I'm doubly happy when Anna (Dr. Li) declares somebody well. I'm glad that I've been able to help them get better, but I'm also glad that they'll be going on the same 1,800 calories as the rest of us. That way we'll all last a bit longer.

I'm tired all the time. Yet when I lie down I usually can't sleep, and when I do I dream mainly about big dinners. Jamal's the same way. He works hard, much harder than I do. Maybe as a result he's less demanding about sex. I don't know whether I like that or not.

I dread the thought of our first cannibal feast. Yet it can't be far off. Will I be able to eat human stew? Yes, of course. When you're hungry enough, you'll eat anything.

Jamal makes ghastly little jokes about it. "You heard about the cannibal who passed his brother in the forest?" he asks, leering. Or pats my still ample backside and says, "Lunch. Hey, take that back. Lunch and dinner."

How, and above all why, have I put up with him so long?

At least once a day I sneak away and walk outside. I need to be alone for a while, away from the intolerably repetitive faces of my fellow prisoners. Needless to say, I stay off the beaches!

I don't feel so tired outside, I guess because of the enriched air, and I love the smell of the sea. Yesterday a sunbeam worked its way through the clouds and the seawind seemed to glitter with salt.

Yet today even my walk left me feeling down. I climbed, muscles quivering, up a pile of black rock and stood for a while looking out to where the horizon line ought to be. Only it wasn't, because the usual squalls were all around and as I turned, first the ocean and then the drenched jungle faded into the sky without a break.

The dome isn't our prison. This world is our prison, and I ask myself again and again if any of us will ever escape it.

Even if we don't, I'm sure people will come here again looking for us, and I hope they find this. Meantime I hold to the thought of you and the Earth and its sunlight and blue skies as my lifeline.

Item (16.) *From Colonel Kohn's Notebook.*

The time until the supply ship arrives is getting short. If it's late, ciao, good-bye, sayonara. We're running out of food.

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So today we eat human. Two of us do the butchering, I suppose to spread the guilt around. We rotate cooking by roster, and just as I won't name the other butcher, I won't name the cook, other than to state that (s)he doesn't turn a hair over the grisly task.

In fact, once the meat is separated from the frame, it looks just like anything else. We keep the head for decent burial on Earth, assuming we ever get back there. I won't give the name of the entree, other than to say it was someone I knew and liked. But once life has departed, we're all just meat and might as well feed our friends. Think of it as giving the ultimate dinner party.

The smell of cooking permeates the dome. People go about their usual duties, but they keep sniffing. Little groups talk together and I hear some high-pitched laughter. That worries me a bit. No hysterics needed here.

Then we sit down to eat. There are two schools of thought about our protein supplement: It tastes like veal; it tastes like pork. I belong to the pork school. After the meal, everybody's a bit frantic. Next day: We have leftovers. Nobody bats an eye, and two guys ask for seconds, which I have to refuse them. Cannibalism turns out to be like any other rite of passage. The first time's hard, the second time's a lot easier, and after that you don't think much about it anymore.

However, there's one thing we'll all soon have to think about, and I have to admit it's getting me down.

Item (17.) *From Dr. Li's Report.*

The problem facing us was this: When we had eaten the dead, what then?

I began to hear jokes about "drawing straws." But was it a joke? Surely, I thought, if the supply ship doesn't appear soon, we'll have to be killed one at a time, so that hopefully a few of us — or two of us — or even one of us can return to Earth to tell our story.

At dinner I saw Robert looking over our people with a curiously bleak face, empty of expression. I realized that he was mentally drawing up a new roster. He was arranging our people in order, from those who could be spared most easily to those without whom the whole colony would perish.

Others understood also. I began to miss Vizbee and Smelt, and realized

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that they were hiding from Robert's lethal gaze. How stupid! Surely the path of wisdom was for them to look as busy and useful as possible. But the poor wretches were just intelligent enough to realize whose names must head the list of expendables (I almost said "perishables.") And they remembered the freezer, and the shrouded bodies lying beside them.

Item (18.) *From Colonel Kohn's Notebook.*

I'm weighing the remaining rations for the umpteenth time when Eloise puts her head in the storeroom door. She's white as our last kilo of sugar.

Would I step outside with her? Well, sure. I don't ask why, because I know there'll be a good reason.

"Do you come out here alone?" I ask as we crunch through the lichen. "You shouldn't."

"I have to," she says. "I'd go nuts being inside all the time. Now stop being commander-in-chief for a minute, because I've got something to show you."

She leads the way up a black pile of — what do they call it — scoria? Broken lava chunks the sea will turn into black sand, and —

I only need a glance. "Go back and tell Jamal and Anna to join us."

"If Jamal's busy he'll want to know why."

"The reason is I want him now."

"Yes, sir," she says, and goes.

When the others arrive, I don't even have to point. There's only one thing to see.

A pod of the sea creatures is approaching, maybe twenty, maybe more. They're gray, and close enough now that we can see irregular crusty white patches on their backs and tails — I guess the local version of barnacles. They're a ballet of monsters, rhythmically rising and sinking like the waves, all together.

"They can't come ashore, can they?" asks Eloise, hopefully.

Jamal and I look at each other. We're remembering the one that got Antonelli. The way it rose up on its flippers, the way it tossed its head back, the barking noise. Remembering the inevitable smell of lions. Sea lions. These things are pinnipeds that feed in the sea but drag themselves up on beaches to rest and fight and mate.

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"Look," says Anna, pointing in another direction. "It took her a while, but she got it running. Clever lady."

Way, way off, a gray dot in the gray clouds darkens, takes shape, and turns into the last flyer, repaired and functional and heading our way.

Item (19.) *From Dr. Li's Report.*

Since we had no option but to resist or die, it was unnecessary to encourage the troops — we could rely on our enemies to do that.

As for myself, I put my hardcopy notes in order, wrapped them in plastic and hid them under loose ice in the freezer. Even if we are all killed, I thought, people sooner or later will come here looking for us, and with luck they may find this record. The last corpse that remained uneaten seemed to be watching me, and I came out shivering for more reasons than the cold.

Yet I continued speaking into my notebook, hoping to transcribe the rest of the story later.

Robert had deployed eight people, which was the number of weapons we had. Adding the shuttleport stock to our own slim armory, we had one hundred and eighty rounds, which was enough to do much damage, though not to drive off all our enemies.

I set up an aid station at the foot of the heap of scoria we had taken to calling the Black Hill, and filled a medical kit with M2, tourniquets, a few antibiotics, etc.

Then I climbed the hill to see exactly what was happening. The sea lions (as Robert called them) had vanished under the waves, meaning that they could reappear anyplace. The flyer had turned and was circling, perhaps a kilometer out. It passed over the shoreline, swung back. Wisely, Robert ordered his people to hold their fire.

I noticed that Eloise was standing beside Jamal. I called her over to help me at the aid station, and she had begun to approach with slow steps when in the corner of my eye I caught a flash from the flyer.

I shouted, "Down!" and she dropped to the ground just as the missile struck the Black Hill and exploded. The sound was loud enough to leave my head ringing. Then the sound *Aa! Aa! Aa!* from behind us warned that the sea lions were coming ashore. At the same moment the flyer veered and from an amplifier came a burst of birdsong so loud that it might have

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been the giant mythical Roc calling to its mate. At that, the margin of the jungle trembled and something roared in reply.

Item (20.) *From Colonel Kohn's Notebook.*

I can't say I ever liked Julia Mack. But I always respected her, never more so than now. She's got a very weird army, but she's doing first-rate command and control.

She's got an Arkie sitting beside her with an amplifier and she's got her goddamn launcher. Must be awkward — leaning out the pilot's port to fire it, so the backflash doesn't fry her. But she manages. A managing gal.

Okay, here come the lions from the sea.

Okay, here come the bearpigs from the jungle. There's more birdsong, this time from the line of trees, so Arkies are in the jungle as well, leading the troops.

The Cousins are closing in. If we make every single shot count, they'll still win. If panicking was any use, I'd panic.

Since it isn't, I'll have to try something else.

I cross over to Jamal and hand him my notebook. "Take care of this."

He raises black arched eyebrows.

"I have something to do. You're in command till I get back. If we live through today, you can sock me good and hard on the jaw."

That's sort of a good-bye.

Item (21.) *From Colonel Kohn's Notebook (continued by Jamal al-Sba'a).*

Kohn leaves the field of battle. Much as I dislike him, I don't think he is running away. He is a brave Jew.

May the Ever-Living One preserve him, for I hope to collect on his offer at the end of this day.

It's strange, I've never seen him talk into this notebook, yet he always has it with him. The idiot light goes on when I speak, so I suppose it's picking my voice up. I have no notebook of my own — all my stuff except my weapon was lost in the flight from Main Base.

All right, we have only eight weapons. We will soon be assailed from two sides. Do we fight out here in the open, or withdraw to the dome and try to defend it? This is the kind of decision a commander must make, and

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if he's wrong, everyone is lost. I've always longed for power, now I feel its crushing weight.

I decide that we'll retreat, for two reasons: first, Captain Mack and her goddamn missiles. She can kill many of us and we can't afford losses. Second, the Cousins can afford losses, so the damage we do to them is beside the point. The only strategy is to resist as long as possible and then accept our fate. I call Doctor Li and instruct her to move the aid station inside the dome. Eloise gathers up the medical kit and heads back, while Li waits to see if we take any casualties on the retreat. The Chinese woman appears perfectly calm.

Mack is coming round again in her flyer. The noise of the engine is lost in the volume of sound rising on all sides — the roaring, the warbling, the barking of the creatures from the sea.

And — *Inshallah!* — another flyer is rising to meet her! So this is why Kohn left us!

Item (22.) *From Doctor Li's Report.*

All my life I had struggled to attain the Buddhist ideal of non-attachment — maybe out of cowardice, because I feared the pain of loss.

Maybe this is why I fled from life into the laboratory — from the knowledge of passion to a passion for knowledge. Why, until Robert came to Bela, I was so much alone.

When I saw our one fully functional flyer take off, I felt as if I'd been stabbed in the heart with an icicle. Then I told myself that if Robert intended to crash into the other flyer, he would have said good-bye to me first.

So I comforted myself, thinking that, yes, he intended a dangerous game — to distract and alarm Mack, make her fire and waste her remaining missiles. He went, I decided, to court danger, not to seek death. Yet the flyer shot straight at her, moving far too fast for safety, and she must have been startled, for her craft yawed and for a wonderful moment I thought it would spin out of control and crash. But then she mastered the controls and the two aircraft began a twisting, turning ballet that I can only compare to the mating dance of mayflies.

Then our craft turned and fled, with Mack in pursuit.

I found myself again atop the Black Hill without any sense of how I

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got there. Looking down for a moment, I saw an incredible sight, the creatures of two worlds paralyzed by shared amazement and staring upward.

A sea lion had crashed through a barrier of stunted trees, and it rested propped on immense flippers with its tusked face in the air. Without the support of the sea its own weight oppressed it, and its great scarred sides heaved with the effort of breathing.

On the landward side, bearpigs standing on their hind legs moved their heads from side to side, following the action above like entranced listeners following the music at a concert. Arkies were pointing with their bronze weapons and exchanging wild and strangely sweet snatches of song.

I saw the launcher emerge from the pilot's port of Mack's ship, and an instant later came the blinding backflash. The missile burned a long twisting trail, and my heart stopped because I realized that it was homing in, that it was too swift for its target to escape, and then it struck our flyer, which exploded in a great orb of flame like an opening peony. Dark fragments floated downward like gull's feathers into the sea. From our enemies came a crescendo of sound that I can never describe — one world triumphant over another, howling its victory.

Next I felt a grip on my arm; it was Jamal and he said, "Come on, we're retreating to the dome. Save yourself."

I answered, "Why?" wishing only for my life to be over.

Item (23.) *From a Letter of Eloise Alcerra to Her Mother.*

We're all inside the dome together. There was one real shocker when it turned out the door to the hangar had been left open.

Something forced its way in, I didn't see what, but I heard an impact weapon cough and then a couple of guys slammed the door, I think pushing a body out. End of Crisis One.

I was looking for Doctor Li. I'd brought in the medical kit, but to be any good it had to be married to the one person who knew how to use it.

I found her looking awful and I said in alarm, "Are you wounded?" She said, "No, only dead," which I took to be some kind of weird joke — meaning, like, aren't we all?

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Jamal was yelling orders, and I said to him, "Colonel Kohn won't like you taking his job away from him."

To my amazement, Jamal said, "Kohn's dead."

"No, he's not."

He ran off, saying he had to check the rest of the doors, especially the loading doors onto the pad, because they were big enough to let in an army if they'd been left open too.

Paying, of course, no attention to me whatever.

I went back to Anna Li, and she was preparing our hospital for new casualties. Her movements were strange, jerky like a marionette, and she hardly seemed to see what she was doing.

I said, "Anna, what's wrong? I mean, aside from the fact that we're all going to be killed, what's the matter?"

She said, "Robert's dead."

Second one in five minutes. Patiently I told her, "No, he's not, he's up on one of the catwalks under the dome, checking the air intakes."

She stopped and looked at me steadily. "I saw him die," she said.

"Well, he must've died very recently, because I saw him climbing a ladder when I was bringing in the medical kit."

"Inside the dome?"

"Of course inside the dome. He'd have to be nuts to be climbing an exterior ladder."

At that her face turned to parchment and she fainted. I caught her going down and laid her on an empty cot. The blind woman, Mbasa, was demanding to know what was going on, so I led her over and sat her down and gave her Anna's hand to hold.

Then I went looking for Colonel Kohn. As I pushed through the people milling around in the main lobby area, most of them were talking about his death. Apparently everybody had seen him die, and only I had seen him alive.

I suppose I should say I doubted my own sanity, but I didn't. What I doubted was everybody else's.

I found a metal ladder with its supports embedded in the duroplast and started climbing. I really don't like heights, but pretty soon I was twenty meters in the air and running along a metal catwalk, wondering where the damp warm air was coming from until I realized it was everybody's breath, rising and collecting up there.

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I spotted him standing at the main air intake. He'd pulled off the housing and shoved back the big flexible duct and he was aiming his pistol between the metal louvers. He fired the way real marksmen do, touching the stud so gently that I could hardly see his fingertip move. The pistol coughed and something outside roared.

"One less," he muttered, and I didn't know whether he meant one less round or one less enemy, or both. "What are you doing here, Eloise?"

I told him that everybody had seen him die, including Anna, and he'd better show himself alive before she died of grief and before Jamal had time to make everybody hate him.

"You underestimate them both," he said. "Oh, oh. Step back and open your mouth and cover your ears."

I did and the catwalk jumped and I felt like I'd had an iron bell over my head and somebody had hit it with a sledgehammer.

"Oh my God," I was muttering. "Oh my God." He yelled something at me but I was almost deaf.

He walked me away from the spot. My ears were still ringing, but after a little while I could understand him. He talked like a lecturer.

"If that last missile had hit the grille we'd have a big hole in the dome. And it's accessible to an exterior ladder. But it just occurred to me that we ought to let them come in this way, because they'll be squeezed together on this goddamn catwalk and we can shoot them like rabbits. Or maybe just pry the catwalk loose and let them fall."

He told me to go see Jamal and have him order two people with guns up here. "And tell Anna not to wet her pants. I'm alive as I ever was. As soon as my two shooters get here, I'll be down."

Before going I asked, "Why does everybody think you're dead?"

"It's the flyer. I was going to take it up and harass Mack and see if I could get her to waste her last missiles. But somebody else got there first."

"Who?"

"Vizbee and Smelt, of course. I guess they figured they were on the menu and the battle gave them a good chance to escape. Though where they hoped to escape to, I don't know. Idiots. Now, scram."

Item {24.} *From Colonel Kohn's Notebook (Kohn speaking).*

Jamal tells me he's deferred the punch on the jaw until either the

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Cousins break in, or else we get away. That way if he knocks out a few teeth I can either have dental care or else not need it.

I've had some of the guys loosen the retaining bolts on the upper catwalk. A bearpig tore out the grille and louvers but nothing's tried to get through yet. I suppose they've figured out that it's like climbing into a bull's eye.

I wish I knew if Mack's got any missiles left. Let's see, there were six in the armory to start with. One fired into Krebs's quarters. One to blast the power station. One to open up the mess hall. Three fired here. Does that mean she's out?

I bet not. I bet she had a couple stored away in some secret place, maybe underground. This lady is daring but also careful. If she has more, they'll soon be hitting a door. Preferably two doors, one on each side. Then the big beasts will break down what's left, and they'll be inside.

We'll kill a lot of them but it won't make any difference, because, as Anna said, you can't fight a whole world.

WHAM!

Hear that? Just in case anybody gets to listen to this record. I wish I wasn't so goddamn right all the time. I wish I was dumber, so I couldn't see things coming. I wish Anna and I were anyplace but here.

It's the door into the hangar again.It's bent and bulging inward but still standing.

Lots of pressure against the outside. Nerve-shattering squeals of metal grinding on metal. It moves slowly, but it does move. *E pur si muove* — what Galileo told the Inquisition — but it does move. Meaning the Earth, which probably we'll never see again.

That noise like a very loud shot was a hinge breaking. If only these things were nuclear steel, but they're not; they're strong, but we need something indestructible.

I order four shooters to the threatened door. Order one guy to stand behind each shooter and grab his weapon if he's killed or wounded. Yell for the shooters on the catwalk to come down. Order one to join Jamal, the other to blow off the loosened retaining bolts if something comes through the intake, as of course something will. Order everybody to stay away from the area underneath. Order Jamal to watch the double doors that open onto the shuttlepad. If the Cousins break in there, we're seriously screwed.

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Finally stop giving orders. I've done the best I can, now we'll fight it out and they'll win, as possibly they deserve to do. As Eloise said, it *is* their world.

On the way to her hospital, Anna gives me a blissful smile. She's actually happy to be dying with me — compared to living without me. In all my long life, nobody ever looked at me that way before.

Item (25.) *From the Letter of Eloise Alcerra to Her Mother.*

I feel like such an idiot, talking, talking to you across the light years at a time like this. But what else can I do?

It'll hurt you to know exactly how I died, but not as much as not knowing. And I want you to know my last thoughts are with you.

The expected blast just hit the double doors to the pad right in the middle and the metal snapped and bent. Then steady, unrelenting pressure.

All the usual sounds from outside. Warbling, roaring, barking. I hardly hear them, I'm listening to the outcry of the metal as it bends. A lot of muscle out there. An arm reaches through, one of the bearpigs, long claws scratching at the metal. Jamal yells *Hold your fire!*

And of course he's right, that would've been a waste of ammo. There's scrabbling around outside, more singing, more roaring, and then the pressure suddenly gets much, much worse. You can see the strong metal bulge, something snaps, something else snaps. Whatever's pushing is breathing in huge gasps.

We have to wait until the doors collapse, then shoot whatever's on the other side. Its body will block the opening, but not for long.

Mama, when I close my eyes for an instant I see your face.

Item (26.) *From Colonel Kohn's Notebook.*

The double doors to the pad burst open. One of the sea lions that's been leaning against them takes two shots and screams, screams like a wounded animal anywhere, only thirty times as loud.

Then with a huge metallic crash the catwalk comes down, carrying half a dozen bearpigs with it. I step up and shoot the one that's still moving.

Turn back and see that the body of the sea lion is blocking the double

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doors. It's like the hull of a boat, black and slick except for many white scars of past battles for mates and the two small entry holes left by the impact weapons.

Bearpigs are trying to pull him out of the way, and an Arkie scrambles over him, takes one look at what's waiting for him and scrambles back. But the body's moving now, and it's last-stand time in the old Beladome.

Item (27.) *From Dr. Li's Report.*

And then came a thunderous roar and such a collective scream as I never thought to hear even in hell.

Item (28.) *From the Letter of Eloise Alcerra (as dictated to Dr. Li).*

Jamal spun on his heel and picked me up and threw me out of the way before jumping himself.

I landed against the curved wall of the dome just as a long plume of fire licked into the doorway and the body of the sea lion burst into flame, all the layers of fat under its hide igniting like wax, melting, spattering here and there, burning gobbets flying. A guy who was caught in the blast was turning black and falling apart like a doll hit by a blowtorch.

If the Cousins hadn't been there to block the opening partly, we'd all have been fried. As it was, Jamal's clothes caught on fire and I threw myself on him and rolled, feeling the flame and not feeling it, until it was out.

And then people were grabbing me by the wrists and pulling me into the hospital, and somebody had Jamal too, and about the same moment the roaring stopped and I realized that the supply ship's shuttle was down and the retros had finally been turned off.

Item (29.) *From the Report of Doctor Li.*

I have never been busier than during the loading of the shuttle.

The surviving Cousins had fled for the moment, but of course they would be back. So time was of the essence, and we had serious burn cases. Robert had suffered compound fractures of the radius and ulna of his left arm. He had either been blown down or had fallen hard trying to escape the blast.

Fortunately, the shuttle was bringing in medical supplies among many other things, and we tore the boxes apart to find what we needed.

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Jamal had severe second-degree burns on the torso and some charring on the hands. Eloise had painful but superficial burns on her hands, belly and right breast. A young man serving with Jamal had been burned beyond recognition, and died as we were loading him.

The shuttle pilot, a Lieutenant Mannheim, talked to me as I worked. He was still amazed by what he had found. He said the overcast had been unusually dense, even for Bela, and he was almost on top of the port before he saw that it was under attack.

Since the shuttle is unarmed, he did the only thing he could by landing in the usual way, using the retros as weapons. Robert praised and commended him, as indeed was only just, for this young officer — though suddenly confronted with an unimaginable situation — had saved all our lives.

At the earliest possible moment, we lifted off. I did not feel entirely safe until we rose above the clouds, into eternal sunlight blazing against the blackness of space.

Item (30.) *From Colonel Kohn's Second Notebook.*

Naturally, Anna wants to knock me out and put me in sickbay for the next six months. I tell her to give me a nerve block and splint the broken wing.

I also get a rest, which I need. Anna bathes me. I'm fed and allowed to sleep under sedation for twelve standard hours. When I wake up, I visit Jamal and find him encased in a kind of body suit that protects his burns from infection and promotes healing. Anna says he'll need a lot of grafting when we get home.

His hands are in no condition for punching me, but I renew my offer for whenever they are. He's wearing a blissfully silly smile, and I think is still too far under the M2 to hear me or care much, one way or the other. He's alive and loved and floating on a morphine cushion, and that's as close to paradise as any of us are likely to get.

Sitting beside him, Eloise is bright and talkative. She's wearing bandages soaked in a topical anesthetic, and when I ask how she's doing, says, "My right tit will look like hell for a while." She holds up her thickly wrapped hands and intones, "And never, never will I play the harp again." Funny lady.

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Then I brief the supply ship's Captain Cetewayo (pronounced approximately Chetch-why-oh, with a click to start). He's a big guy with a polished bald head like a bronze ingot, which nods as I brief him. Fortunately he wears a uniform too, and I don't have to spell out the facts of life for him.

The loss of a whole mining colony is going to cause a stupendous stink back home. I expect to spend several years as a professional witness, being grilled by all sorts of people. I want everything done by the book before we leave Bela for good.

He agrees, collects my notebook and a number of other pieces of evidence and seals them in his safe. Issues me this new notebook. Orders Mannheim to start collecting statements from the survivors — all ten of us.

Since bureaucrats believe nothing until it's written down and all the signature blocks properly filled in with names and ranks, these statements will be collated and an after-action report prepared, signed and sealed.

Admittedly, this is a cover-your-ass operation. But there's one more thing. It's essential that we check the mining camp and Main Base from the air, to insure that there are no human survivors. If we had troopers with us, we'd have to physically go inside and inspect, whatever the danger. Since we haven't the people or weapons to do that, we must do what we can — or risk our careers.

That sounds cold, but I am metaphysically certain that everybody except ourselves is dead. We gotta do what we gotta do, but we will not save anybody by doing it. Cetewayo agrees and gives the necessary orders.

Then I join Mannheim in the shuttle. We strap in and drop off the underbelly of the ship, and all at once it's déjà vu all over again, as some ancient philosopher put it.

We're diving into the endless roiling clouds, rain hits us like surf and a huge crooked bolt of lightning flashes from cloud to cloud. I think how silly it would be, after all I've been through, if I get killed by a commonplace thunderbolt while performing a routine and essentially meaningless duty.

Instead we drop through the last and darkest layer of the eternal

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overcast, and we're flashing over the familiar blue-black sea. With a navigator disk in hand I'm directing Mannheim to Alfa. Soon we're viewing the familiar sheds and domes and chicken runs of the mining camp, and I ask Mannheim to drop down lower.

The jungle's closing in, preparing to erase every track humans ever made here. Only our machines are still alive, the power station chugging away, the brown stream of slurry gushing down the hill like a giant case of dysentery. The lights are long burned out, of course, and —

Something moving —

No! Somebody!

A little figure that's not an Arkie!

Standing in a doorway, waving!

We dip down for an instant, I haul him in with my workable right arm and we're soaring again. I look at him in awe, trying to imagine how he survived in an alien jungle this long — all alone!

He's even skinnier than I remember him, he's wearing rags, his pants are held up with a vine, he's got long angry scars on face and hands, and whatever isn't scarred is covered with some kind of insect bites. He smells like the whole rotten understory of Bela's jungle. He's beautiful.

"Ted," I tell him, "I'm sorry I missed you the last time."

"Well, here I am," he says, and starts to tell his story — without a single stutter.

How he wriggled out of the bearpig's grasp, leaving his oversized coveralls behind; how the beast wasted time trying to eat the coveralls, allowing him time to slide into the thickets; how he ran and hid; how he made himself a cape of leaves to keep warm and shed the rain. How he watched a wingless feathered creature like a parrot, and began cautiously eating what it ate. How in time he worked his way back to Alfa, found it deserted, scavenged some torn clothing and lived off the contents of a couple of sealed supply cartons until he heard the flyer.

"You weren't worried we'd go off and leave you?"

"No," he says serenely. "I know you're not like that," at which I have the grace to blush.

While listening to Ted Szczech, we've crossed the roiling bay and now arrive at the estuary of that river whose name I never learned — not that

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human names mean anything on Bela anymore. I suppose the Arkies have a musical phrase for it, as they have for everything else.

Zamók is rising before us, and I see that things have changed. It's no longer Main Base; the Arkies have already cleared some of the human hovels off their Incan stonework. Reconstruction of lovely temples to follow, I'm sure.

There's a crowd of them gathered in the cleared area, standing in circles, and they turn their heads when they see us. Some of them shake weapons, but most merely look once and then turn back to what they're doing. We don't count any longer, but a rite is a rite.

In the center of the crowd stands Julia Mack. I tell Mannheim to bring us to a low hover so we can watch. She completely ignores us, looking straight ahead, and she's wearing a gorgeous robe of some sort, and no wig, and she looks more than ever like Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein, or how Gertrude would have looked if she'd been wrapped in a Persian carpet.

Suddenly Ted's stutter comes back, and he starts sputtering, "Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-"

"I'll explain later," I murmur.

Now an Arkie steps up behind her and he's carrying — not the usual bronze implement — no, by God, it's white metal, it's the titanium mountaineer's pickaxe that Mack's parents must have brought to Bela so long ago. Only it's been fitted with a longer handle, so the little Arkie can reach her.

He swings it, and Mannheim exclaims something, I don't know what, and Ted gives a strange cry as Mack falls heavily with the point in her brain. Another priest comes forward, carrying the usual curved axeblade to complete the ritual.

Mannheim says, "We've got to stop this," and I say, "No, we don't."

This is her reward for all she's done for them — to become a god of the Arkies, to join their pantheon and live here forever. At last she's joined her true species, and she's no longer alone.

When it's over — all but the ritual meal — I have to jiggle Mannheim's arm to get his attention.

"It's their church," I tell him, "and it's their communion. We don't belong here. We never did. So let's go."

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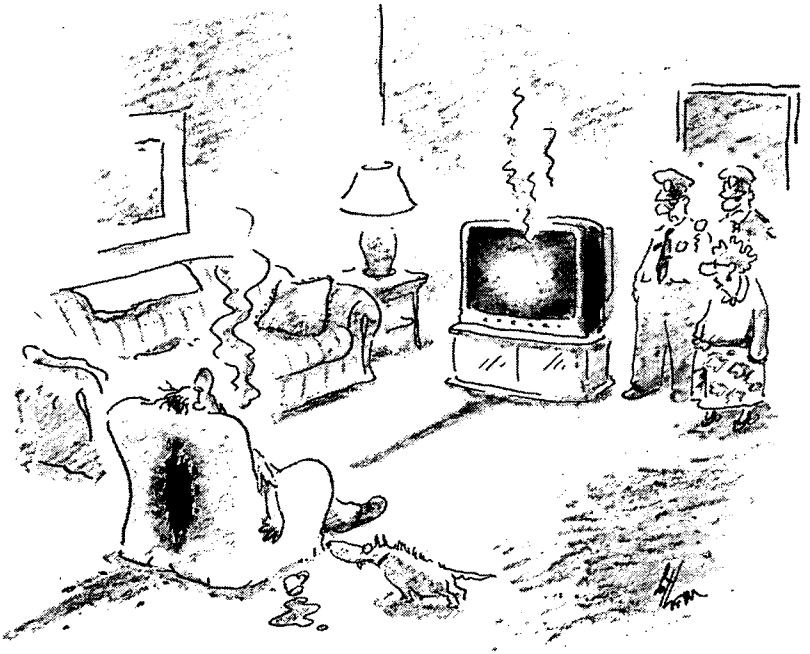
CONCLUSION AND JUDGMENT

KOHN, Robert Rogers, cannot be held legally culpable for the disaster on Planet Bela. However, as the only surviving senior official he must be held administratively responsible, since there is no one else left to blame. He is therefore involuntarily retired from the Security Forces with official reprimand and reduced pension.

PROTEST of judgment filed by Citizens Alcerra, al-Sba'a, and Szczech is hereby REJECTED.

PETITION of KOHN, Robert Rogers, and spouse to be allowed to live in retirement in an oasis of the Great American Desert is hereby GRANTED.

BY ORDER OF THE HONORABLE COMMITTEE



"I think it was a cathode death ray."

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In the three years since we published "The Ant King," Ben Rosenbaum has made a reputation for himself as one of the more promising and daring new writers around, with stories in Asimov's Science Fiction, The Infinite Matrix, Strange Horizons, Argosy, McSweeney's, *and* F&SF, *plus a chapbook entitled* Other Cities. *He's currently at work on a novel, but he took time out to write this story as part of a project called* Exquisite Corpuscle *that consists of serially-inspired fiction, a bit like the game "Telephone."* Corpuscle *was perpetrated by Frank Wu and Jay Lake and is forthcoming from Wheatland Press.*

Start the Clock

By Benjamin Rosenbaum

THE REAL ESTATE AGENT for Pirateland was old. Nasty old. It's harder to tell with Geezers, but she looked to be somewhere in her Thirties. They don't have our suppleness of skin, but with the right oils and powders they can avoid most of the wrinkles. This one hadn't taken much care. There were furrows around her eyes and eyebrows.

She had that Mommystyle thing going on: blue housedress, frilly apron, Betty Crocker white gloves. If you're going to be running around this part of Montana sporting those gigantic, wobbly breasts and hips, I guess it's a necessary form of obeisance.

She said something to someone in the back of her van, then hurried up the walk toward us. "It's a lovely place," she called. "And a very nice area."

"Look, Suze, it's your mom," Tommy whispered in my ear. His breath tickled. I pushed him.

It was deluxe, I'll give her that. We were standing under the fifty-foot prow of the galleon we'd come to see. All around us a flotilla of men-of-war, sloops, frigates, and cutters rode the manicured lawns and steel-gray

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streets. Most of the properties were closed up, the lawns pristine. Only a few looked inhabited — lawns strewn with gadgets, excavations begun with small bulldozers and abandoned, Pack or Swarm or Family flags flying from the mainmasts. Water cannons menacing passersby.

I put my hands in my pants pockets and picked at the lint. "So this is pretty much all Nines?"

The Thirtysomething Lady frowned. "Ma'am, I'm afraid the Anti-Redlining Act of 2035 — "

"Uh-huh, race, gender, aetial age, chronological age, stimulative preference or national origin — I know the law. But who else wants to live in Pirateland, right?"

Thirtysomething Lady opened her mouth and didn't say anything.

"Or can afford it," Shiri called. She had gone straight for the ropeladder and was halfway up. Her cherry-red sneakers felt over the side for the gunnel running around the house. Thirtysomething Lady's hands twitched in a kind of helpless half-grasping motion. Geezers always do that when we climb.

"Are *you* poor?" Tommy asked. "Is that why you dress like that?"

"Quit taunting the Lady," Max growled. Max is our token Eight, and he takes aetial discrimination more seriously than the rest of us. Plus, he's just nicer than we are. He's also Pumped Up: he's only four feet tall, but he has bioengineered muscles like grapefruit. He has to eat a pound or two of medicated soysteak a day just to keep his bulk on.

Thirtysomething Lady put her hand up to her eyes and blinked ferociously, as if she were going to cry. Now that would be something! They almost never cry. We'd hardly been mean to her at all. I felt sorry for her, so I walked over and put my hand in hers. She flinched and pulled her hand away. So much for cross-aetial understanding and forgiveness.

"Let's just look at the house," I said, putting my hands in my pockets.

"Galleon," she said tightly.

"Galleon then."

Her fingers twitched out a passkey mudra and the galleon lowered a boarding plank. Nice touch.

Frankly, we were excited. This move was what our Pack needed — the four of us, at least, were sure of it. We were all tired of living in the ghetto — we were in three twentieth-century townhouses in Billings, in

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an "age-mixed" area full of marauding Thirteens and Fourteens and Fifteens. Talk about a people damned by CDAS — when the virus hit them, it had stuck their pituitaries and thyroids like throttles jammed open. It wasn't just the giantism and health problems caused by a thirty-year overdose on growth hormones, testosterone, estrogen, and androgen. They suffered more from their social problems — criminality, violence, orgies, jealousy — and their endless self-pity.

Okay, Max liked them. And most of the rest of us had been at least entertained by living in the ghetto. At birthday parties, we could always shock the other Packs with our address. But that was when all eight of us were there, before Katrina and Ogbu went south. With eight of us, we'd felt like a full Pack — invincible, strong enough to laugh at anyone.

I followed the others into the galleon's foyer. Video game consoles on the walls, swimming pool under a retractable transparent superceramic floor. The ceiling — or upper deck, I guess — was thirty feet up, accessible by rope ladders and swing ropes. A parrot fluttered onto a roost — it looked real, but probably wasn't. I walked through a couple of bulkheads. Lots of sleeping nooks; lockers, shelves; workstations, both flatscreen and retinal-projection. I logged onto one as guest. Plenty of bandwidth. That's good for me. I may dress like a male twentieth-century stockbroker, double-breasted suit and suspenders, but I'm actually a found footage editor. (Not a lot of Nines are artists — our obsessive problem solving and intense competitiveness makes us good market speculators, gamblers, programmers, and biotechs. That's where we've made our money and our reputation. Not many of us have the patience or interest for art.)

I logged out. Max had stripped and dived into the pool — or maybe it was meant as a giant bathtub. Tommy and Shiri were bouncing on the trampoline, making smart-aleck remarks. The real estate agent had given up on getting anyone to listen to her pitch. She was sitting in a floppy gel chair, massaging the sole of one foot with her hands. I walked into the kitchen. Huge table, lots of chairs and sitballs, enormous programmable foodcenter.

I walked out, back to the Lady. "No stove."

"Stove?" she said, blinking.

I ran one hand down a suspender. "I cook," I said.

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"You cook?"

I felt my jaw and shoulders tense — I'm sick of being told Nines don't cook — but then I saw her eyes. They were sparkling with delight. Indulgent delight. It reminded me of my own mother, oohing and aahing over brick-hard cookies I'd baked her one winter morning in the slums of Maryland, back when my aetial age was still tied to Nature's clock. My mother holding up the wedding dress she'd planned to give me away in, its lacy waist brushing my chin. One evening in college, when I'd looked up at the dinner table, halfway through a sentence — I'd been telling her about *The Hat on the Cat*, my distributed documentary (a firebrand polemic for Under-Five Emancipation; how cybernetics would liberate the Toddlers from lives of dependence) — and saw in her eyes how long ago she'd stopped listening. Saw that I wasn't Nine to her, but nine. Saw that she wasn't looking at me, but through me, a long way off — toward another now, another me: a Woman. Big globes of fatty breasts dangling from that other-me's chest; tall as a doorway, man-crazy, marriageable; a great sexualized monster like herself, a walking womb, a proto-Mommy. She was waiting for that Susan, Woman-Susan, who would never show up.

"I cook," I said, looking away from the Lady's eyes. Putting my hands in my pants pockets. I could have used a hug, but Max was underwater and Tommy and Shiri were trying to knock each other off the trampoline. I went outside.

"We could bring in a stove module," the Lady called.

Outside, a pigeon was poking through the lawn. It was mangy and nervous enough to be real. I stood for a while watching it, then my earring buzzed. I made the Accept mudra.

"Suze?" Travis said.

"Why are you asking, Travis? Who do you think is wearing my earring?"

"Suze, Abby's gone."

"What do you mean, gone?"

"She's not picking up. Her locator's off. I can't find her anywhere." When Travis was nervous, his voice squeaked. Now he sounded like a mouse caught in a trap.

I looked at the active tattoo readout on my left palm. Travis was

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home. I made the mudra for Abby. No location listed. "Stay there, Travis. We're on our way."

I ran up the plank. Max was dressed again, rubbing his dreadlocks with a towel from the poolside towel tree. Tommy and Shiri were sitting at a table with the Real Estate Lady, looking over paperwork in the tabletop display.

"We've got to go. A personal emergency has come up," I said. Max was at my side instantly.

"Listen, we want this place," Shiri said.

"Shiri, we all have to talk about it," I said.

"What's to talk about?" Tommy said. "It's *awesome*."

"This is the first place we've looked at," I said.

"So?"

The Real Estate Lady was watching us with a guarded expression. I didn't want to say that Abby was missing. Not in front of her. Not in front of that can-you-really-be-trusted-to-look-after-yourselves-all-on-your-own-without-any-grownups attitude that came off her like a stink. I took my hands out of my pockets and balled them into fists. "You're being totally stupid!" I said.

"What's the emergency?" Max said quietly.

"I know what Travis and Abby would say," Tommy said. "They totally want a place like this. Let's just get it and we'll have the rest of the day free."

"We can go windgliding," Shiri said.

"Travis and Abby didn't even agree to getting a *house* yet, never mind *this* house," I said. I felt Max's hand on my shoulder.

"That's because they haven't seen it," Tommy said.

"What's the emergency?" Max said.

"There's probably been a train wreck and Suze has to make sure she's the first ghoul at her flatscreen," Shiri said.

"Screw you," I said and walked out of the house. I was shaking a little with adrenaline. I got in our clowncar and clicked on the engine. Max hurried out the door behind me. I slid over to the passenger seat and he got in to drive.

"We can pick them up later," he said. "Or they can take a cab. What's up?"

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I made the Abby mudra and showed him my palm. "Abby's missing. Travis hasn't seen her, and she's not picking up."

Max pulled out into the street. "She left the house this morning early, with that old black-and-white camera you got her. She was going to shoot some pictures."

I flipped open the flatscreen in the passenger-side dash and logged in. "That's no reason for her to turn off her locator. I hope she didn't stay near the house — a Nine walking around alone in the ghetto, taking photographs — imagine how that looks."

We hummed and whooshed out of Pirateland, up a ramp onto I-90. "Abby wouldn't be that dumb," Max said. But he didn't sound too sure. Abby's impetuous, and she'd been melancholy lately. "Police?" he asked, after a moment.

I shot him a sharp look. The police are Geezers — height requirements keep Under Twelves out of their ranks, and the Teens are mostly too uneducated and unruly. I didn't have any strings to pull with them, and neither did Max. "We wait until we have more data," I said. "Now shut up and let me work. Head home."

Most people have the notion that the public footage is this permanent, universal, easily searchable archive of everything that ever happens, clearly shot, from any angle. It's the job of people in my profession to help perpetuate that illusion. Actually, the networks are surprisingly spotty. There are millions of swarmcams wandering around in any major urban area, but they have a high failure and bug rate, and their pictures are grainy and indistinct — only a lot of imaginative algorithmic reconstruction makes them viewable. There are plenty of larger cameras linked to the net, but often hidden in a byzantine maze of permissions and protocols. And there are billions of motion sensors, audio pickups, locator tags, and data traffic monitors added to the mix, but they're not well correlated with each other. In a few hours on a Sunday morning, one square mile of downtown Billings generates enough data to fill all the computers of the twentieth century, plus all the paper libraries of the centuries before. It's hell to search.

But I'm good. I had enough footage of Abby on file to construct a good bloodhound, and then I spawned a dozen of them and seeded them well. Pretty soon the hits started coming back. Abby had crossed the street in

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front of our house at 09:06, and turned her locator tag off — on purpose, I imagined, since there was no error log. She'd stopped for bagels and udon in a deli on Avenue C at 09:22; shot pictures in the park until 09:56. She'd talked to a couple of Fifteens there and taken something from them. I couldn't see what, in the grainy gray swarmcam pictures, but it made the hair on the back of my neck rise.

From 10:03 I lost her; she'd gone up an elevator in a bank and disappeared. There's a network of private walkways and an aerial tram in that part of Billings that are poorly monitored. I had a cold feeling in my gut; that was a great way to lose me, if you were trying to.

I searched all the exits to those walkways and the tramway for Abby, buying a bunch of extra processing power on the exchange to run it faster. Nothing.

Max had entered among the spires and alleys of Billings. Dappled shadows of metal and translucent plastics and ceramics rippled over the clowncar. I looked out at the people walking through the corridors around us, all ages and sizes and colors. An old woman was walking slowly on a slidewalk just above us — she must have been an aetial Ninety, which made her a hundred and twenty or so. Walking, slowly, under her own steam. You don't see that every day.

I went back to some old footage I had of a birthday party and grabbed a sequence of Abby walking. I built an ergodynamic profile of her and fed that to my bloodhounds.

Bingo. At 10:42, Abby had left the aerial tramway in disguise. Platform shoes, trenchcoat, false breasts and hips and shoulders — she was impersonating a Fourteen or so. It looked ridiculous, like Halloween. She'd consulted a piece of paper from her pocket.

By 10:54 she was in a bad area. "Head for 30th and Locust," I told Max.

"Shit," he said. "No police?"

"I don't have anything yet that would warrant their attention. Nothing that proves she was coerced."

"So we need other backup," Max said grimly.

"Yeah." I looked up. "Can you get it?"

"I think so," he said. He made some Call mudras with one hand and started talking. "Hey, Dave, how you doing? Listen, man — " I tuned him out as he made his calls.

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My last shot of Abby was at 11:06. She was being hustled into a doorway by a gargantuan Fifteen. His hand was on her elbow. Biodynamic readouts from a few stray hospital swarmcams confirmed that her pulse was elevated. Should I send this to the police? Would it prove Abby was coerced? But what was she doing with the weird disguise and the sneaking around? Just slumming? Or would I get her in trouble?

Was Abby buying drugs?

"Parkhill and 32nd," I said to Max. My fingers were still and I was just looking at that last picture, Abby and the giant, him pulling her into darkness.

"Can you meet us at Parkhill and 32nd?" Max was saying. "Damn, I know, man — that's why we need you...."

When we got there, five of Max's friends were waiting. Four were clearly from his gym. Two of them were probably Nines or Tens (one swarthy, one red-haired and freckled) and they were even musclier than Max, their heads perched like small walnuts on their blockbuster bodies. The other two were Pumped Up Teens — maybe Fifteen or Sixteen. Their blond, slavic-boned faces sat on bodies like overstuffed family room sofas or industrial refrigerators: fingers the size of my forearm, thighs the size of my entire body. I wasn't sure how we were going to get them in the building.

And then there was the fifth — an Augmented Three. She stood a little apart from the others, her tiny arms at her sides. They were clearly afraid of her. One soft brown eye scanned the clouds, and she had a beatific smile on her face. Her other eye was the glistening jewel of a laserlight connector, and there were other plugs and ports glistening in her brown scalp among her cornrows.

Max stopped the car.

"Who's the Three?" I asked.

Max turned to me. He looked nervous, like he thought I was going to make fun of him. "That's my sister, Carla."

"Cool," I said quickly. He got out before I could say anything yet stupider, like, "How nice that you've stayed close."

I opened my door and froze — Carla was running toward us. "Max!" she warbled, and flung her arms around his waist, burying her face in his stomach.

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"Hi, honey-girl," he said, hugging her back.

I glanced at my palm readout. It had gone blank. So had the flatscreen in the car. It was a safe bet nothing near Carla would be recorded. You could sometimes tell where Augmented Threes and Twos were in the public footage by tracking the blank areas, the little blobs of inexplicable malfunction that followed them around. I once did an experimental documentary on Under-Five Augmentation using that blanked-out footage. It was called *Be Careful What You Wish For* — kind of a rueful, years-later followup to *The Hat on the Cat.*

"Carry me!" Carla said, and Max dutifully swung her tiny body onto his shoulders.

"Carla, this is Suze," Max said.

"I don't like her," Carla announced. Max's face went slack with fear, and my heart lurched. I grabbed the car door so hard my fingernails sank into the frame.

Carla exploded in giggles, then started to hiccup. "Just — *kidding!*" she choked out between hiccups. "You guys are so *silly!*"

I tried to smile. Max turned, slowly, toward the door. It was a formidable steel monstrosity, the kind with a biodynamic access plate governing its security system. Those things are supposed to be off-net, more or less invulnerable to cybernetic hacking. Carla waved at it and it popped open. The four muscleboys crowded their way inside — eager to get to Abby, and away from Carla — and the three of us brought up the rear, Carla still perched on Max's shoulders.

The stairway was dark and rank — it smelled like Teenagers, all their glands and excretions, smeared and sour. Most of the wallglow was dead, and one malfunctioning patch at the top of the stairs was flashing green and red, so that the bodies of the muscleboys ascended the stairs in strobed staccato.

The freckled gymrat was first to the doorway at the top. As he reached for the doorknob, we heard a long moan, and then a series of grunts. Almost snarls. And then, softer, a whimper — a high, female whimper — like the sound of someone tortured, someone in despair.

Carla started to cry. "I don't like it!"

"What is it, honey-baby?" Max said, his voice afraid. "*What's behind that door?*"

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"Don't ask her that!" I barked. "Distract her, you idiot!"

"Max, should I make it go away?" Carla wailed. "Should I make them stop, Max?"

"No!" Max and I shouted at the same time.

"Max," I said as pleasantly as I could manage, "why don't you and Carla go play a nice game in the car?"

"But maybe I should — " Max said, looking at me from between Carla's tiny, shaking knees.

"Now!" I barked, and pushed past them.

Panting came from under the door, panting and groans. The muscleboys looked at me nervously. I heard Max's shoes clumping down the stairs behind me, and he started singing "The Itsy-Bitsy Spider."

"In!" I hissed, pointing at the door. The two overmuscled Nines threw their shoulders against it. It strained and buckled, but held. From inside the door came a strangled scream. The two Pumped-Up Teens braced themselves against the wall and each other, bent their knees, and crouched down with their shoulders under the Nines' butts. "Ready — now!" called the biggest, and all four of them pushed. The door shot open, and the muscleboys tumbled and collapsed through it. I sprinted over their bodies, springing from a buttock to a shoulder to a back to another shoulder, and I was through.

On a tiger-skin throwrug in the midst of a pile of trash, two huge naked Fifteens looked up. The male's skin was a mass of pimples and grease; shaggy hair fell over his shoulders and muscles. The female was pinned under him, her gigantic breasts flopping to either side of her thin ribcage, her knees pinioned around his hips. Between the wiry forests of their pubic hair, a portion of the male's penis ran like a swollen purple bridge.

"Ewww!" I shouted, as they flopped down, pulling the tigerskin over themselves. "Where's Abby??"

"Hi, Suze," said Abby dryly from an overstuffed chair to my left. She wearing a white jumpsuit, and holding a pen and a paper notebook.

"What the hell are you doing?" I shouted.

"I might ask you the same." She motioned to the pile of muscleboys, who were struggling to their feet with dazed expressions.

"Abby! You disappeared!" I was waving my arms around like a Macromuppet. "Locator — bad area — disguise — scary — aargh!"

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"Are you going to follow me around with a small army every time I turn off my locator?"

"Yes!!"

She sighed and put down her pencil and paper. "I'm really sorry," she called to the Fifteens. "My time was almost up anyway. Um, do you mind if we talk in here for a few minutes?"

"Yes!" gurgled the female.

"Abby, come on," I said. "They can't just stop in the middle. They have to, you know, finish what they were — doing. Until it's finished their brains won't work properly."

"Okay," Abby said. "All right, ah — thanks."

In the stairway, I said, "You couldn't just watch a porn channel?"

"It's not the same," she said. "That's all packaged and commercial. I wanted to interview them before and after. I have to know — what it's like."

"Why?"

She paused on the stairs, and I stopped too. The muscleboys, muttering, went out onto the street, and we were alone in the flashing green and red light.

"Suze, I'm going to start the clock."

Like she'd poured a bucket of ice water down my spine. "You're what?"

"I'm going to take the treatments." She spoke quickly, as if afraid I'd interrupt her. "They've gotten much better in the past couple of years; there are basically no side effects. They're even making headway with infants. In five years, it looks like most babies won't have any arrestation effects at all, and — "

Tears had sprung to my eyes. "What are you talking about?" I cried. "Why are you talking like *them*? Why are you talking like being like us is something to be *cured*?" I punched the wall, which hurt my hand. I sat down on the step and cried.

"Suze," Abby said. She sat down next to me and put her hand on my shoulder. "I love being like us — but I want — "

"That?" I shouted, pointing up to the top of the stairs, where they were grunting again. "That's what you want? You'd rather have that than us?"

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"I want everything, Suze. I want every stage of life — "

"Oh, every stupid *stage*, as designed by stupid God, who also gave us death and cancer, and — "

She grabbed my shoulders. "Suze, listen. I want to know what *that* up there is like. Maybe I won't like it, and then I won't do it. But Suze, I want to have babies."

"Babies? Abby, your eggs are forty years old — "

"Exactly! Exactly, my eggs are only forty years old, and most of them are still good. Who do you want to have the babies, Suze? The Geezers? The world is starting again, Suze, and I — "

"The world was fine!" I pulled away from her. "The world was just fine!" Snot and tears were running down my nose into my mouth, salty and gooey. I wiped my face on the sleeve of my stockbroker's suit, leaving a slick trail like a slug. "We were fine — "

"This isn't about us — "

"Oh baloney!!" I lurched to my feet, grabbing the railing for balance. "As if you're going to live with us in a galleon and fire water cannons and go to birthday parties! You're just not, Abby, don't kid yourself! You're going to be *that!*" I pointed up the stairs. "Sexual jealousy and sexual exchange economy and cheating and mutual-exploitation-and-ownership and serial monogomy and divorce and the whole stupid crazy boring...."

"Suze — " she said in a small voice.

"Just don't!" I said. "Don't drag it out! If you want to do it, do it, but then leave us alone! Okay? You're not welcome." I turned and headed down the stairs. "Get the hell out."

Max was standing at the bottom of the stairs. I didn't like the way he was looking at me. I brushed past.

The boys from the gym were in the car, eating yard-long submarine sandwiches with great gusto. Carla sat on the front steps, talking to a rag doll. She looked up, and her red jewel of an eye flashed — for a moment it was as bright as looking into the Sun at noon. Then she looked past me, into the sky.

"What are you afraid of?" she asked.

I leaned against the doorframe and said nothing. A wind came down the street and crumpled sheets of paper danced along it.

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"I'm afraid of cows," she volunteered. "And Millie" — she held up the rag doll — "is afraid of, um, um, you know the thing where if you take all the money people spend and the way they looked at each other that day and you put it inside what the weather's going to do and then you can sing to cats and stuff? She's afraid of that."

I wiped my eyes on my sleeve. "Can you see the future, Carla?"

She giggled, and then she looked serious. "You guys are all wrong about that. It's just a game you made up. There isn't any future."

"Do you like being Augmented?" I asked.

"I like it but Millie doesn't like it. Millie thinks it's scary but she's just silly. Millie wishes we were like people and trees and we didn't have to make things okay all the time. But then we couldn't play with bolshoiye-gemeinschaft-episteme-mekhashvei-ibura."

"Okay," I said.

"Max is coming out with Abby four thousand five hundred and sixty-two milliseconds after I finish talking right now and projected group cohesion rises by thirty-six percent if you don't have a fight now so you should take the clowncar and I'll give them a ride and I'd love to live with you but I know I'm too scary but it's okay but can I visit on Max's birthday?"

"Yes," I said. "You can visit on my birthday too."

"I can? I can?" She jumped up and hugged me, flinging her arms around my waist, pressing her cheek into my chest. "Wow, I didn't even know you'd say that!" She pulled away, beaming at me, then pointed to the car. "Okay, quick, go! Bye!"

I got in the car and clicked on the engine. Carla waved and she held Millie's arm and waved it too. The door behind her opened, I saw Max's shoe, and I drove off.

A quarter mile away from Carla, the flatscreen blinked on again, and my earring started buzzing like crazy. I told it to let Travis through.

"Abby's fine," I said. "She's with Max. They'll be coming home."

"Cool," Travis said. "Whew! That's a relief!"

"Yeah."

"So Tommy and Shiri sent me video of the house. It looks *awesome*. Do you love it too?"

"Yeah, I love it." I was on I-90 now. Beyond the spires and aerial trams

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of Billings, I could see the funhouse suburbs spreading out before me — windmills, castles, ships, domes, faerie forests.

"Cool, because I think they signed some papers or something."

"What? Travis, we all have to agree!" As I said it, it occurred to me that the only one who hadn't seen the place was Abby. I gripped the wheel and burst out crying.

"What? What?" Travis said.

"Travis!" I wailed. "Abby wants to start the clock!"

"I know," Travis muttered.

"What? You *know*?"

"She told me this morning."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"She made me promise not to."

"Travis!"

"I was hoping you'd talk her out of it."

I took the exit for Pirateland, swooshing through an orange plastic tunnel festooned with animated skeletons climbing out of Davy Jones's lockers. "You can't talk Abby out of anything."

"But we've got to, Suze, we've got to. C'mon, we can't just fall apart like this. Katrina and Ogbu — " he was doing his panic-stricken ratsqueak again, and suddenly I was very sick of it.

"Just shut up and stop whining, Travis!" I shouted. "Either she'll change her mind or she won't, but she won't, so you'll just have to deal with it."

Travis didn't say anything. I told my earring to drop the connection and block all calls.

I pulled up outside the galleon and got out. I found a handkerchief in the glove compartment and cleaned my face thoroughly. My suit, like the quality piece of work it was, had already eaten and digested all the snot I'd smeared on it — the protein would probably do it good. I checked myself in the mirror — I didn't want the Real Estate Lady to see me weepy. Then I got out and stood looking at the house. If I knew Tommy and Shiri, they were still inside, having discovered a roller-skating rink or rodeo room.

Parked at the side of the house was the Real Estate Lady's old-fashioned van — a real classic, probably gasoline-burning. I walked over to it. The side door was slid open. I looked in.

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Inside, reading a book, was a Nine. She was tricked out in total Kidgear—pony tails, barettes, T-shirt with a horse on it, socks with flashy dangly things. Together with the Lady's Mommystyle getup, it made perfect, if twisted, sense. Personally I find that particular game of Let's-Pretend sort of depressing and pitiful, but to each her own kink.

"Hey," I said. She looked up.

"Um, hi," she said.

"You live around here?"

She wrinkled her nose. "My mom, um, kinda doesn't really want me to tell that to strangers."

I rolled my eyes. "Give the role-playing a rest, would you? I just asked a simple question."

She glared at me. "You shouldn't make so many assumptions about people," she said, and pointedly lifted her book up in front of her face.

The clop-clop of the Lady's shoes came down the drive. My scalp was prickling. Something was not altogether kosher in this sausage.

"Oh, hello," the Lady said brightly, if awkwardly. "I see you've met my daughter."

"Is that your actual daughter, or can the two of you just not get out of character?"

The Lady crossed her arms and fixed me with her green-eyed stare. "Corintha contracted Communicative Developmental Arrestation Syndrome when she was two years old. She started the treatments seven years ago."

I realized my mouth was hanging open. "She's a clock-started Two? She spent twenty-five years as an unaugmented two-year-old?"

The Lady leaned past me into the van. "You okay in here, honey?"

"Great," said Corintha from behind her book. "Other than the occasional ignoramus making assumptions."

"Corintha, please don't be rude," the Lady said.

"Sorry," she said.

The Lady turned to me. I think my eyes must have been bugging out of my head. She laughed. "I've seen your documentaries, you know."

"You *have*?"

"Yes." She leaned up against the van. "They're technically very well done, and I think some of what you have to say is very compelling. That

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one with all the blanked-out footage — that gave me a real feeling for what it's like for those children who are wired up into the Internet."

An odd and wrongheaded way of putting it, but I limited myself to saying, "Uh — thanks."

"But I think you're very unfair to those of us who didn't Augment our children. To watch your work, you'd think every parent who didn't Augment succumbed to Parenting Fatigue and sent their toddlers off to the government daycare farms, visiting only at Christmas. Or that they lived some kind of barbaric, abusive, incestuous existence." She looked over at her daughter. "Corintha has been a joy to me every day of her life — "

"Oh, Mom!" Corintha said from behind her book.

" — but I never wanted to stand in the way of her growing up. I just didn't think Augmentation was the answer. Not for her."

"And you thought you had the right to decide," I said.

"Yes." She nodded vigorously. "I thought I had the obligation to decide."

The Suze everyone who knows me knows would have made some sharp rejoinder. None came. I watched Corintha peek out from behind her book.

There was silence for a while. Corintha went back to reading.

"My friends still inside?" I asked.

"Yes," the Lady said. "They want the place. I think it fits six very comfortably, and — "

"Five," I said huskily. "I think it's going to be five."

"Oh," the Lady looked nonplussed. "I'm — sorry to hear that."

Corintha put her book down. "How come?"

The Lady and I looked at her.

"Oh, is that a rude question?" Corintha said.

"It's a bit prying, dear," the Lady said.

"Ah — " I said. I looked at Corintha. "One of us wants to — start the clock. Start the conventional biological aging process."

"So?" Corintha said.

"Honey," said the Lady. "Sometimes if people — change — they don't want to live together anymore."

"That's really dumb," said Corintha. "If you didn't even have a fight

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or anything. If it's just that somebody wants to grow up. I would never get rid of my friends over that."

"Corintha!"

"Would you let her talk? I'm trying to respect your archaic ideas of parent-child relationships here, Lady, but you're not making it easy."

The lady cleared her throat. "Sorry," she said after a moment.

I looked out at the mainmast and the cannons of our galleon. The rolling lawn. This place had everything. The trampolines and the pools, the swingropes and the games. I could just imagine the birthday parties we'd have here, singing and cake and presents and dares, everyone getting wet, foamguns and crazy mixed-up artificial animals. We could hire clowns and acrobats, storytellers and magicians. At night we'd sleep in hammocks on deck or on blankets on the lawn, under the stars, or all together in a pile, in the big pillowspace in the bow.

And I couldn't see Abby here. Not a growing-upward Abby, getting taller, sprouting breasts, wanting sex with some huge apes of men or women or both. Wanting privacy, wanting to bring her clock-started friends over to whisper and laugh about menstruation and courtship rituals. Abby with a mate. Abby with children.

"There's a place over by Rimrock Road," the Lady said slowly. "It's an old historic mansion. It's not quite as deluxe or as — thematic as this. But the main building has been fitted out for recreation-centered group living. And there are two outbuildings that allow some privacy and — different styles of life."

I stood up. I brushed off my pants. I put my hands in my pockets.

"I want us to go see that one," I said.

—for Jeff and Terri

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

FORGET ABOUT IT

I ALMOST always enter a theater expecting to enjoy the movie I've been assigned to review; however, I must admit that in certain instances my objectivity has been trashed by the fear that I'm about to suffer a flashback to the last awful thing that happened to me during a film featuring some of the same actors, director, or scriptwriter whose work I've come to see. Thus it follows that having experienced *Human Nature*, the previous genre picture directed by Michel Gondry and scripted by Charlie Kaufman *(Being John Malkovich* and *Adaptation)*, being yet haunted by the memory of Patricia Arquette covered in fur, I was nearly devoid of hope as regarded their latest excursion into the genre, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Even had Gondry and Kaufman not been involved, the odd cinematic coupling of co-stars Jim Carrey and Kate Winslet would have caused me some anxiety, being reminiscent of that cosmically unfortunate pairing of physical comedian Adam Sandler and dramatic actress Emily Watson in Paul Thomas Anderson's *Punch-Drunk Love*.

The movie derives its title from an Alexander Pope quatrain:

> How happy is the blameless vestal's lot!
> The world forgetting, by the world forgot.
> Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind!
> Each pray'r accepted, and each wish resign'd.

I'm not sure how the "blameless vestal" fits in, but the rest of

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the quote seems appropriate to the theme. *Spotless Mind* is yet another entry in the burgeoning science fiction sub-genre of movies either directly based upon or inspired by concepts exploited by the work of Philip K. Dick (though it could be argued that John Varley's work has somewhat more relation to this particular film), the majority of which deal to one degree or another with the problematic aspects of technologically altered memory. The most recent film to reference this material, John Woo's *Paycheck*, starring the less talented half of the late Bennifer, was perhaps the stalest and most unimaginatively mounted science fiction thriller in recent memory, a category that includes some remarkably stale and unimaginatively mounted attempts at simulating Dickian paranoia. Few of the films that preceded it have done much to establish a grand tradition, and the forthcoming September release, *The Final Cut*, a Robin Williams thriller treating of similar subject matter, promises no better. In spite of this record of artistic and (for the most part) box office failure, Hollywood has become so enamored of this sub-genre, it causes me to wonder if somewhere in Los Angeles there does not live a madman with an editing machine modified to perform delicate mnemonic cuts who delights in tampering with the memories of studio executives and watching them endlessly repeat their mistakes. Of course if such a man exists, he is doubtless extremely frustrated by his redundancy.

Spotless Mind is not, like the majority of its predecessors, a garden variety action film that treats the human condition as an aspect of high concept; it actually seeks to illuminate that condition through an examination of the love relationship between geeky introvert Joel Barish (Carrey) and the hyperkinetically eccentric Clementine Kruczynski (Winslet), two mutually attracted opposites who, as the movie opens, meet for the second time at the beach in Montauk on Long Island, the same exact spot where they met for the first time many months before, an event that neither of them now remembers. These are fragmented people, impaired from having had their memories of one another excised (when Joel asks if there's a danger of brain damage from the memory wipe, he's told "Technically, the procedure *is* brain damage."), and bewildered by the shadows of love and anger. Their fumbling stabs at reconnecting, their inept expressions of the residue of the attraction that initially brought them together, seem de-

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spairing and childishly confused, and they try to reject those feelings. But something, some undeniable trace of what they were, continues to tug at them. As they ride the train back from Montauk, sitting separately, peeking at each other, their flirting takes on an awkward desperation that calls to mind the tragedies of junior high. We are influenced to believe that whatever happens to Joel and Clementine, it will not be good.

At this point the script conveys us seamlessly back into the past, to the morning when Joel discovers that Clementine has had her memories of him erased after a terrible argument. Broken-hearted, unable to cope with loss, further motivated by a petulant desire for revenge, he decides to have his memories of her deleted. To that end he hies himself to Lacuna, a business situated in a shabby office wherein Dr. Howard Mierzwiak (Tom Wilkinson), a doofus-y middle-aged sort with the hint of a dark side, the inventor of the process, instructs Joel to clear his apartment of every item that may remind him of Clementine. After Joel complies, delivering the treasures and detritus of the relationship stuffed into garbage bags to the Lacuna office, he's drugged, placed in his own bed wearing pajamas and a silvery metal hood that markedly resembles the headdress of the Sphinx, and the memory wipe begins.

Spanning a leisurely procession of cleverly written and emotionally honest scenes, *Spotless Mind* has by this juncture established itself as a quirky, affecting relationship movie driven by the performances of its co-stars. Unless you've seen certain of Carrey's TV and film work from the late eighties and early nineties, films like *Doing Time on Maple Drive*, it's conceivable you don't believe that he's capable of doing drama, but here he's thoroughly persuasive in his low-key depiction of a lonely, inarticulate man who's more comfortable hunched over his journal, drawing cartoons of women, than he is in talking to one. As the flaky Clementine, whose moods shift as drastically as do her day-glo hair colors, Winslet hasn't been this energized since her film debut in Peter Jackson's *Heavenly Creatures*. Though they're an ill-matched couple, a combination that ensures volatility and promises emotional disaster, as actors they play off one another astonishingly well. We like these characters and, more importantly, we believe in them. We would be quite happy with an ordinary narrative detailing their passionate ascendancy

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and decline. However, once Mierzwiak's sloppy, irresponsible assistants, Patrick (Elijah Wood, in a sharp departure from his wholesome alpha-hobbit role) and Stan (Mark Ruffalo), set up shop in Josh's bedroom, tracking down and eliminating Joel's memories of Clementine, the pace of the picture accelerates and comes to verge on the horrific. Utilizing techniques honed in his hallucinated videos, most notably with Björk, Gondry's style veers away from the drear naturalism of the early scenes. Splashy camera work draws us into a surreal chase across the memory map of the relationship. Joel, you see, is having second thoughts. He has recalled the reasons why he loved Clementine and is now trying to hang on to his imperiled memories and, in essence, to her. He begins to flee with Clementine (or rather with his central image of her) across a landscape composed of their days and nights, a landscape that's being dismantled as they pass through it. They leap forward and backward across the timeline of the relationship, moving through rooms with pulsing walls; gray spaces from which the detail is being scrubbed, peopled by faceless figures out of a Francis Bacon nightmare; snowy beaches that morph into frozen rivers; with now and then a sudden detour into Joel's infancy and to incidences of childhood humiliation and trauma.

While Joel is engaged in this doomed struggle, Stan and his girlfriend Mary (Kirsten Dunst), Lacuna's receptionist, party beside their sleeping subject, drinking, smoking pot, and finally having sex on the bed next to him. Patrick has excused himself in order to see his own girlfriend through a crisis — the girlfriend turns out to be Clementine. It's soon disclosed that when Patrick performed her memory wipe, he became infatuated and, in order to win her, has stolen Joel's mementos of the relationship (in addition to a pair of Clementine's panties), thereby becoming expert in manipulating her. The juxtaposition of these three frantic actions, interposed by jump cuts and featuring boozy hand-held camera passages, form a giddy collage that is perfectly mated to the subject matter, but more than a little disorienting — indeed, there are times when the frenzied pacing and idiosyncratic imagery create a feeling in the viewer that borders on vertigo. This vertiginous feeling is provided with an intellectual equivalent when it's discovered that one of Mierzwiak's employees has been memory wiped and was part of an office love triangle, a revelation that ultimately serves as a crucial

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plot point and causes us to suspect that the reason underlying the curious behavior of all the characters may be that they, too, are impaired. And perhaps it's all a touch too vertiginous, because it's during this section that the movie's focus blurs and its energy begins to dissipate. Eventually, inevitably, Joel's last memory of Clementine — their initial meeting — is erased and he is returned to a painfully blank solitude, while Clementine inhabits an isolation no less painful, albeit heavily populated with meaningless relationships. But of course this is simply the end of their first story. The story that began with their second meeting still has to play out, and it's here that the movie falls apart.

The denouement of one of the earliest and most successful films dealing with technologically altered memories, *Blade Runner* (I'm speaking of the version that received theatrical release), consists not of footage shot by Ridley Scott, but of outtake footage culled from another film (reportedly Kubrick's *The Shining)* that shows a road passing alongside the wheels of a car, while Harrison Ford's voiceover narrates a far more optimistic result than that conceived by Scott. Apparently the studio considered the original ending a downer and therefore not accessible to the mass audience to whom they wished to appeal. It may be that something similar has occurred with *Spotless Mind*. I can't be certain who dictated that changes were made, but it's clear that there were changes, since late drafts of the Kaufman script show the characters in old age returning for yet another memory wipe at film's end, suggesting that they have become habituated to the process, relying on it as a panacea for all their emotional difficulties. The much less bleak ending imposed upon the script by agencies unknown makes a certain glib, hazy sense, but feels tonally disconnected from what has preceded it and, since it's as leisurely paced as the opening, gives the impression that rather than reaching a conclusion, the movie is running out of gas.

At this moment, Charlie Kaufman is one of the few scriptwriters in Hollywood whose name creates an audience expectation of a certain attitude and style, the type of expectation generally reserved for directors. The hallmark of his scripts is a post-modern cleverness, and that cleverness often seems both their greatest strength and greatest weakness. There's no doubt that this is Kaufman's most human script — unlike his previous ones, its chief concerns are its characters,

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not the ideas they may represent. That being so, dialing back on the cleverness might have been in order, because as things stand, the archness of the writing frequently distracts from a story that had the potential to be a contemporary tragedy with the darkly comic weight of Kafka or Celine. Despite these weaknesses, *Spotless Mind* outstrips its sub-genre by constructing a low-fi take on high concept, treating peripherally the notion of what it means to be human and, more centrally, examining the hearts of two particular humans within the frame of that philosophical context. That it falls short of achieving its ambition inspires a poignant dissatisfaction of the sort we would not feel in relation to the failure of a film with less ambition. And so the most profound tragedy here is that what might have been an important film, perhaps even a landmark film, has been reduced to a merely interesting and, in sum, forgettable two hours in the dark.

"What do you expect, Methuselah!
Of course you're going to have senior moments!"

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Carol Emshwiller reports that her award-winning novel The Mount *will be reprinted soon in an edition for Young Adults and a new novel,* Mr. Boots, *is also in the works. She says that a collection of short stories is also in the offing, but probably not for publication this year.*

Here she brings us another one of her distinctive tales, a fable of art, lies, and life during wartime.

The Library

By Carol Emshwiller

WE'RE HEADED AWAY FROM war, past it, around and beyond the enemy lines. We're circling behind where the battle rages. Mostly we've hiked at night and hidden during the day. We no longer hear or even see the lights of explosions.

We each have a bomb and there are ten of us. We have several fire-starters. That should be more than enough. What we do is for the good of all mankind.

Theirs is the largest library in the world, but it's not our books. They're not even in our language.

Even if we knew the language they're in a kind of writing we can't read. It's full of squares and Os and curlicues. We've been told many of the books are about the art of war and that the poetry is bawdy. There's pictures of nudes and of lovers in all possible positions.

I'm not to let any of us look at the books. Nor am I to let one single book survive. There can be no peace and no morality as long as these books exist.

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There are statues at each corner of the building. Caryatids along the porches. They say that, in the center of the library, there's a reading room — a garden — open to the sky. It's full of flowers. Birds. Even trees.

They say we'll recognize the library. It's larger than any other buildings. Our side thinks that when it's destroyed, their side will lose all momentum.

By now we have come to the beach. We're from the south. We've never seen the sea. We walk with our feet in the shallow water so our tracks will be washed away. When we camp for the day, we don't sleep much even though the sound of the water is soothing. We're distracted by all these new things. We watch the waves. We keep tasting the water — we can't believe it's salty. Some of us want to fish. Some of us want to taste the things on the shore, but I don't trust them not to be poison.

Around midnight we hear singing, but it has no triads, no fifths. An accompanying instrument thunks and buzzes. I tell my group, "There. Listen. You can see what kind of people these are by this racket."

My group laughs. They're nervous and this odd music doesn't reassure them.

The library is across from an artificial pool so as to show it off with its reflection.

This has all been explained to us, and yet when we come upon the reflecting pool and the sparkling whiteness of the library, its painted frieze, the golden roof...we're silent. We've never seen such a building. It's evening and the Sun makes everything pinkish/orange.

Seagulls wheel over our heads as if they are the avant-gardes of the books, their shrieks as alien as the language of the enemy.

We don't move. We just watch. The Sun goes down. Stars come out. Nobody says anything. The Moon rises and reflects in the pool. We should move back and find a place to camp but we can't tear ourselves away. We sit where we are, fall asleep toward morning, then wake to watch the sunrise.

After the sunrise we load up our weapons and cross to the edge of the pool, march right into it, two by two, and splash across to the library. We don't care if they hear us or not.

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Close up, the eyes of the caryatids stare at us, seem to warn us that the library is not for the likes of us. Each of them has one bare breast. I tell my men not to look.

We head to the main doors. They're of carved wood. Easy to burn down with our fire-starters. (We don't look at them. Who knows what might be carved there.) We would have bashed through them, but they're open. We walk right in.

We're as awed by the inside as we were with the outside. We become aware of how dirty and smelly we are, how we're dripping on their mosaic floor. The Sun, shining through the stained glass of the clerestory windows, leaves odd colors on the walls, tables — on the people. The librarians look up, but they stay calm. Behind them there are shelves and shelves of books. The books are dark and dusty, and look old, as do the librarians. And — we can't believe it's true — all the librarians have one bare breast, sometimes the right and sometimes the left. Now, in front of us men, they don't even try to hide themselves.

We point our guns, but I'm the only one who shoots. I shoot out one of the stained glass windows. I surprise my own group even more than I surprise the librarians. My troops all jump while the librarians just look, though some hold their books closer like shields.

One librarian comes up to us (bare-breasted, brazen as could be), holds her book, a large heavy one, but she doesn't try to cover herself with it. She looks like the enemy — they all have colorless hair and colorless eyes. She addresses us in what seems like two or three different languages, one after the other. Finally in ours. She whispers. She tells us to keep quiet. She points to a sign that says silence even in our language. Then she says, "We have nothing to do with wars in here."

"You lie."

I whisper, too, though I didn't mean to.

She says, "This is a place of truths."

"Your books are full of lies. You, yourself, are a lie."

"Look around you. Does this look like lies?"

I look at the Sun pouring down from the window I shot out. The real color of the Sun comes in whereas the other windows show false colors. My shot is the only truth here. I point to the square of sunlight under the broken window. "There is the truth," I say.

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Her face is narrow and fierce. She wears a robe down to her ankles. Surely it would tangle in bushes if she tries to walk where there are no paths. These people are, clearly, just as we've been told, overly civilized. A civilization at its final gasp. You can always tell by the clothes.

I imagine what the book she hugs so tightly must have in it. Secrets of sex, and perhaps of battles won.

We weren't told what to do with the librarians. I suppose it's up to my discretion.

She says, "There are all sorts of truths."

"You wouldn't know a truth if it was written in stone."

One of my group says, "If it were in stone, it would be true."

I don't answer such a platitude. I tell my group to get out their fire-starters. I say it for all to hear. If the librarians want to escape, it's up to them.

My group hesitates. They don't want to do their job. They take off their packs to get their fire-starters, but more slowly than they should. Grandeur and beauty have confused them. They have lost sight of their principles. I'm tempted to shoot out another window to remind them which side they're on.

The librarians hold their books as though they're weapons. Some have thick covers and metal corners and look heavy.

I shoot again, but this time I don't know what I hit. That fierce librarian attacks me with her book before I can see if I hit another window. Next thing I know my nose is pressed into a mosaic of a triton with an octopus hooked in it. I almost think I'm back at the seashore. Art lies. It always lies. These are — I see clearly — groups of small stones, white and black over blue waves. A shot at the floor would have scattered them back into their reality.

I get up on my knees and point my gun down at the false octopus, but one of my own men turns on me and hits me with the butt of his gun.

I come to bound to a homemade chair. I'm in a simple room no better than our barracks. They say the librarians do live simply. They say the library is their only luxury. There are shelves along the walls as if for books, but with potted plants on them. Some of the pots would make good weapons.

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I don't need my group. I can destroy the library by myself. And if I don't have bombs, I can make new ones. They didn't send out a munitions expert for nothing.

I begin to work on the knots that tie me to the chair. They've been tied by women. I easily loosen them. My jaw hurts where my comrade hit me. Have they all mutinied? Do I have a single friend? Is it because the library is too beautiful? But they told us it would be.

First thing I grab the largest pot to use as a weapon. I pick one with a strong looking plant and hold it by the woody stalk. Then I look out the window to see where I am.

And there's another lie — right on the wall of the hut next door. A painting of trees and flowers, a stream even. As if trying to make this desert place like my land down south, and not succeeding. They may have the library, but we have the forest and the mountains. The painting makes me homesick. But then I realize I'm falling into their trap: taking a painting as the truth. I don't let myself think of home.

I open the door as quietly as possible. There's another room. A writing room. Desk and paper, ink.... Also an easel with the start of a painting. It's the portrait of a child. One of their kind — almost white hair and light eyes. I hate that pale, insipid look. I splash the ink on it. I wish for more ink and then I see there's paint I can smear.

I feel good afterward. I've struck a blow for truth. I pick up my plant-weapon and go in search of chemicals for a bomb, and maybe food, too.

I creep outside carefully, and there is the back of the library — as impressive as the front. If I had even a little of the gold of the roof I'd be a wealthy man. I think to climb a pillar, grab some golden tiles and go home. Bypass the war altogether.

I go into a different hut. Looking for a kitchen, or a shed with fertilizers. I find another writing room. There's no painting so I spill the ink all over the writing.

In the kitchen, I find a paste with what looks like scallions mixed in it. God knows what they eat or if this is for the cat. Or, for all I know, their pet rat. I eat it anyway.

Then I look for chemicals. But, of course, the labels on things are different. I have to try everything by smell — even by taste. I make a concoction, but I'm not sure about it. I hope it really is a bomb.

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I grab my (maybe) bomb and my plant weapon and start out again when I hear the door open and there's a librarian, a young one.

How can such a pale creature look so beautiful?

Thank goodness her breast is covered — or she'd be in more trouble than she knows.

I can see on her face she has passed through the room where I damaged the writing. She's half my size, but she comes after me with her fists. I swing the plant. The pot flies off and dirt flies all over. She gets a face full. Dirt in her eyes and nose and mouth. Next thing, here I am, trying to clean her up. And saying I'm sorry — in my own language.

She can't answer in any. Her mouth is too full of dirt.

I find the water jar. I lean her over a basin. I use a clean cloth to get things out of her eyes. They're not colorless as we keep saying. They're tan with little greenish radiating lines. Actually they're almost exactly the same color as her hair. Her skin is tan also. She's all of a piece. You could say the same about me, black hair and black eyes, dark skin.

It takes a long time to clean her up. After, we sit on cushions across from each other, both of us exhausted. She's a mess. Her hair is wet and hanging down, her shirt front is sopping. I'm a mess, too.

Now she says, "Thank you" — in my language. And I say again, "I'm sorry."

She looks to be as taken with me as I am with her. Both of us dazzled with the odd, the unknown — I with my shaved head and top knot and my damaged hands, and she with her almost white hair flying out around her shoulders and her hands soft as a baby's. She must do nothing but read and paint.

Both of us hardly dare to glance at each other — especially after being so close, eye to eye, my arms holding her. I have looked in her ears, in her nose, I've helped her rinse her mouth.

We sit silent. Finally she says, "I'll make tea. I'll get you something to eat."

(I don't care what it is, I'll eat it.)

"Are you going to tell them I'm here?"

"I don't know."

"I would have hit you with the heavy pot if it hadn't fallen off."

"Yes, but you helped me after."

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"I don't know books. I prefer reality."

"I only know books."

"Do you want to see the rest of the world? I'll take you. Help me destroy the library and I'll take you with me."

"Why? Why destroy it?"

"It's all lies. Your life is a lie. I'll bet you do nothing but sit all the time. Did you ever play?"

"Of course I did."

"What did you play?"

"We drew and painted. Sewed. Cooked. Made things. I had a doll."

"That's not play. Play is top-o-the-roost, knick-knack, capture flags.... I don't think you had any fun at all."

"But I did."

"You don't even know you weren't happy."

"But I was."

I feel sorry for all the librarians.

"Come with me. I'll show you happiness. I'll teach you to play. And you know bombing the library will be useful to everybody. The pieces of marble can go to make many smaller houses. The roof can make everybody rich. The painted birds and butterflies pressed into the walls.... There must be a hundred. A hundred people could each have one. You could have one yourself. You could wear it in your hair."

I see I've given her something to think about.

"Give the little people marble and gold. Spread the beauty around so there's some for everybody — and keep some for yourself."

Every time she looks at me I can see her fascination in her eyes. I wonder if she's ever seen a shaved head and top knot before. She keeps looking at my hands. I always did like my hands. I'm proud of my scars. All have been achieved honorably.

I'm everything the opposite of her. She's even small for one of the enemy, while I'm tall for one of us.

She says, "We thought your eyes were so dark they were blind to all things delicate and light. We said you were too tall to be strong, but you're as if made of ropes."

"We thought you were blind for the opposite reason." Then I say, "My group...they betrayed me. Where are they? What did you do with them?"

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(No doubt by now all my men want are books and bare-breasted librarians.)

"We fed them periwinkles and clams. They spit them out and ate their own dried-up things. We walked them back to the beach where there are cottages. Most of us went with them. We thought you were safely tied up."

"How many librarians stayed?"

"Six. And me."

The perfect time to bomb it and set fires.

I talk to her about chemicals. She helps me read the labels. I find things to use as fire-starters. I even find stuff for a few bombs.

We work well side by side. I think what it would be like bringing her back to my people. How shocked my people would be.

"What we'll do is put these little sacks all inside and outside the library. It's time. It's already getting dark. Let's do it now."

She says, "There's nobody there at night."

"Good. First you can pick your favorite book to keep just for yourself."

I feel good that I can give her something. I'm going to make sure she gets a butterfly or a bird, and some of the gold.

She says, "We'll need a lamp. There aren't any windows except those high stained glass ones. Books take up all the wall space."

WE GATHER UP the little packages and tubes and carry them to the library. Right away I climb up and put some under the roof. She's never seen anything like my climbing. All I need is a little finger grip and toe grip. My own men can't do that. I see I impress her even more than before.

When I place the last package and climb down, I can't resist the admiration in her eyes, I lean to kiss her. She looks as if she's leaning to kiss me, but she turns away at the last minute.

We light our lamp and go inside. Right away she takes out a huge book.

"We can't bring *that!*"

"I just want to show you some pictures. There are lots like this here, but this book is the best."

The book is so big she has to put it on a special stand. She opens it and there they are — in gold leaf, or looks like it, a golden woman and a golden

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man. Naked. The woman is handing the man grapes or dates, and he reaches, not for them, but toward her breast. It's as lewd as we always said their drawings are. But the green of the trees is as beautiful as the gold, so is the blue of the sky, as though green and blue could be as valuable as gold. The landscape is more like my world than like hers. It's a picture you could fall right into — and would want to except for the naked couple. If I were there I'd hurry away behind the trees in the foreground.

She turns the page and the next is even worse than the first. It's as if you're standing on a higher hill than before, in the shadow of pine trees, looking down. This time the couple is farther away, but you can see the golden man has his hand on the woman's golden breast now, and the grapes or dates are on the ground, forgotten.

Why is she showing me this? And she looks so young and innocent? She isn't. Art has ruined her. She knows everything already. Probably more than I do. No wonder they want me to destroy the library.

I don't want her to turn to the next page. Nor the next and the next. I can imagine what they'll be. And why look when we can do?

I grab her and throw her down...on the make-believe octopus. I drop on top of her. Kiss her — hard.

At first she's too shocked to react. She doesn't seem to know what's happening, but then she struggles. She bites my lip. I pull back and she yells, first a wordless shout and then, "No! Help!" If she keeps on making a racket, whatever other librarians are left here will come. I cover her mouth with my hand. She bites my hand this time and knees me. I'm the one should be yelling, no.

"I'll let you go if you don't shout."

"You're an animal."

"It's you, you are an animal. How could you show me those pictures? And why? If not for...." But we don't have words for that — not ones you can say to women.

"I wanted you to see something beautiful. I thought if you saw them you might not want to burn them."

"I want to burn them all the more. Are all the books like this? Full of nakedness and corruption?"

"Let me read something to you. Let me find the book — the one I'd choose if I could have one of my own.

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She goes straight to a small, hand-sized book. She holds it close to the lamp and begins to read, translating as she goes. Even in my own language I don't understand it at all.

Last to leave and first to come.
A guessing game of death or life.
Leaves of summer, leaves of spring.
We fall but in our own ways.
Neither like streams nor leaves.

Perhaps the meaning is lost in translation. I say, "Poetry lies as much as pictures do."

"We think it's more true than truth."

"There can't be such a thing?"

Even so...even after the bad pictures and the meaningless poetry...even so I still like her. And she...even after I threw her down and almost raped her. She still likes me. I can see it on her face.

I say, "I like you. In spite of the pictures. But I don't suppose you can like me."

"I don't know what to think."

"I don't either, but I like you anyway. But I don't even know your name."

"Yawn," she says.

"What!"

"My name is Yawn."

That's an ugly word in our language. I can hardly make myself say it. I wonder what my name means in hers.

"I'm Gabb."

"Bless water."

Should I have said the same after she said her name? Why bless? And by what crippled god?

"Let me read you this other poem."

Joy is in the view from above
As houses seen by eagles
As after storms or in them,

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Seen as if you are the whirlwind.
Be such.

It doesn't make sense to me any more than the other one did. I'll destroy this gobbledygook. "Let's get on with the burning. We'll start with that big book."

I should have known better than to start with that book. Even the little book of poems can be a weapon. And I'm not ready for it. She hits me hard in the stomach. I lean in pain, but then my training kicks in. I hit her so hard she flies across the mosaic floor into the shelves of books beyond.

I go to her. I call, "Yawn. Yawn." I don't bother keeping quiet anymore.

Before I pick her up, I take out the fire-starters. I throw out several in different directions. Then I carry her out to the pool. Halfway across it I put her on the edge of it and turn to watch the fire. It starts fast, and when it reaches the bombs I set around the edges and under the roof, the blasts begin. Not as large as I'd have wished them to be.

Of course the librarians come, but six women are no match for someone like me. One problem, though, I have to keep my eyes shut because of all those bare breasts. I'm afraid I might touch one.

They trip me. I fall into the pool. They're water people and I'm not. I'm helpless in it. They hold my head under. It's Yawn yells for them to stop just when I'm choking. They pull me to the edge and Yawn turns me over and pumps the water out. It takes a while before I can breathe.

The little homemade bombs are still going off now and then as the fire reaches them, but they're much too small. The building won't come down. Some of the librarians stand near the carved doors, their silhouettes outlined against the flames inside. They don't dare go in yet.

Nobody's paying attention to me. I roll over on my back and watch the dawn come, turning everything pinkish again. But the library is a mess, black from smoke, some corners broken, but my bombs were too feeble to bring down the walls.

It's still an imposing sight in an entirely different way. The caryatids still look down in disapproval from over their bare breasts. A few gold tiles have fallen from the roof but nobody is rushing to pick them up even though just one would make a person rich. The librarians walk right past them.

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Yawn sits beside me. I tell her I didn't mean to hit her so hard. She says, "I know."

Finally the fires settle down enough for the librarians to wrap wet scarves around their faces and go in. Yawn stays with me. Says, "I don't understand why you wanted to destroy it."

"To show your side we can bring down your most magnificent building."

"But you didn't. We don't even have any soldiers to protect it, and you didn't. Even so you failed."

"But look what one single man...I, alone...."

"You failed."

"I'll bring you a bird. I'll bring you gold."

"What would you do if you were a golden man and lived in those pictures?"

"And you were the golden woman."

"Would you throw me down like you did?"

I'm thinking I would put my hand on her breast, but I don't say it. "Never again."

"Or maybe you'd melt me down and have me made into coins. Or you'd melt yourself down."

"I don't think unreal things. Besides, I'd rather be of use after I die. My skin gone for leather. My bones for spoons. I'd never become anything for beauty. Promise you won't let that happen to me."

"We're not going to kill you. I won't let us."

"Let's escape together."

She's tempted. "What would you do, go steal tiles?"

"I'd rather have you than golden tiles."

That pleases her. She will come. She says, "Hurry," takes my hand to pull me into the bushes by the side of the pool, but I pull her in the other direction. I want to see what the librarians are doing in there. Maybe I can keep them from putting out fires.

She tries to hold me back. "But you said...."

"Your art tells lies and I lie, too."

Inside, the library is full of smoke. Librarians are stamping out fires, putting rugs and wet towels over books. Some bring smoldering books out

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and dump them in the pool. Some books are so large it takes two or even three librarians to carry them.

Those still inside have wet scarves around their faces but Yawn and I don't. We begin to cough right away. A librarian hits me from behind and knocks me into a still-burning book. Two of them and Yawn drag me out and dump me in the pool to stop my burning clothes, my burning topknot.

They argue about me. Mostly in their own language. Then one says, on purpose in my language, "He's not worth the trouble." Finally they say to Yawn — in my language, "He's yours to do with as you wish." They sound disgusted.

They get thongs to tie my ankles — loose enough so I can walk a little. The fires are out in the library and Yawn hurries me through the smoke to the central garden. It's untouched except a little smoky. She doesn't say a word. She ties me to a bench and leaves.

THERE ARE TREES in there. Flowering bushes. A birdbath but no birds. Still too smoky. I watch the little fountain. I don't try to get loose. I'm tied so I can lie down. I do.

Finally Yawn comes back with a lumpy awkward bundle and with tea and food. She gives me the tea and a fishy-smelling sort of cake and dates. I don't feel like eating, especially not a fishy cake, but the tea is good.

Then she starts unpacking the things she brought, a folding stool, a folding easel, a wooden slab, long as her arm, to paint on. An odd thing to be doing after what's been happening. I'm an exotic creature fit for a zoo. She can't wait to get me down on a flat surface. To put on some wall, I suppose. Which makes me wonder what she'll do with the real me after. Will the painting take my place?

She begins, even as I'm sipping tea.

She works in spurts and then looks at me and thinks. Finally she shows me what she's done so far. There I am, just begun, but even so you can see it's me. You can see my topknot curling down behind my ear and then over my shoulder though now it's burned off. She has my eyes almost finished. They're like holes in the board. I suppose all of it will look like a hole through the board when she's done.

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She starts to paint again. We're quiet and then she says, "I want you to be.... I wish you could be...."

"I'll never be."

Whatever it was she was going to say, she'd hate me if I was. She loves me because I'm not like her. Same reason I like her.

Then, again, she turns the painting toward me. She sits beside me to study it. Now my face is almost finished.

She keeps looking over at me as though wondering what I think about it. I'm impressed. Not only with how much it looks like me but that it only took her a short time to paint it. I'm thinking I might steal it if I have the chance.

But I'm angry with myself for thinking it. I say, "This is a lie. Does a flower need a painting of itself?" I hear myself saying, "Do I need this?" even as I'm thinking that I do.

At that thought I bang my fists against the edge of the bench.

"You hate my painting."

"I like it. I like it. I shouldn't, but I do. But where I come from images are not allowed."

"How can that be?"

"And no bare breasts."

"Are breasts bad?"

"You'll learn that if you come home with me."

She says again, "Bless water."

"We don't bless things like water."

"Your language has no word for blessings. And no word for asking somebody to come see a sight. No word for a sky full of birds and we all look up. Even my name, you can't guess its many meanings."

"Tell me."

But she says, "You keep saying we should love the real, but the real disappears. One of these days this painting will be all that's left of you."

Is that a warning?

Then we hear a great rushing sound, loud as thunder right overhead, and the ground shakes and the painting falls and the stoa surrounding the garden...every pillar breaks.

Then it comes again. Worse.

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After that, silence. Not even the cry of a seagull.

We wait, looking at each other.

And it comes again, just as we thought it would.

We are safe in the center of devastation. Everything is already flattened around us, but we don't move.

So it isn't me that makes the golden tiles for all to pick up, that buries the books in debris — though I would have wished it were me.

It won't be easy to leave the garden considering what's piled up around us.

I say, "I need to be free now. I can't be tied up."

She can't answer. She can't move.

"I can't go anywhere. Look around you. We're both prisoners."

Odd how the garden itself is untouched. The birdbath and sundial still stand. The trees. There's even water still spouting in the fountain though not as much.

And here's another aftershock.

"Let me go. What harm can I do now? We can't even get out of here. Not easily."

The library looks like piles of talus from back in my home mountains. Unstable to try to climb over. I can, but she can't without my help.

Finally she unties me. She's so shaky she can hardly do it. I make her drink the rest of my tea. For a few minutes she can only talk her own language. I say a few words in mine to remind her. I say, "Don't worry, only this large stone building is destroyed. The librarians are most likely safe and I'll wager your little house still stands."

I take off my shirt, take it to the fountain, rinse it a bit first, and then wet it and wipe her face.

After a while I leave her sitting there and go to examine how hemmed in we are. I leave the dates and cakes beside her. I tell her to eat them if she wants to.

All the arcade is collapsed. I feel as if I'm in my own private grove. This is my fountain. My grape arbor, still climbing up its frame. (The frame stands and yet the wall is rubble.) I make the complete circuit. I see a nest with baby birds in it. I wonder if the parents will come back. Whiffs of smoke and dust still rise now and then. But getting out of here doesn't look good. I can do it, but Yawn can't without my help. Now she's my prisoner.

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I pick a bunch of grapes to bring to her in case she wants something cool and sweet.

It's already getting too dark for climbing the rubble — or for painting. I wonder if she'll ever finish my portrait.

I think to build a fire but the garden is so immaculate there are no dead branches and no dead leaves. Trust these overly refined people to have everything all cleaned up.

I come back, sit beside her and give her the grapes. I put my arm around her and she doesn't flinch away. I say, "It won't be easy getting out."

I feel like First Man and First Woman. They have just crawled out of the earth after the fires and floods of formation, all around them devastation, and it's up to them to clean up and populate the world. Up to Yawn and me. I hold her. I don't say anything. There's the sunset. We can't see the Sun setting behind the rubble, but we see the pink and purple sky. She glows pinkish gold. I say, "That book...and us...."

She says, "That book is burned. They said it was the first to go."

"That was them, wasn't it?"

She says, "I was named for her."

I say, "I was named for a god of war." Then I say it, "This is our garden. We'll live here."

She leans her head against my shoulder. "How will we eat?"

"The fig tree, the grapes...I'll build a shelter out of rubble and tree branches. I'll make us a bed of young boughs."

Then I, like the golden man, forget the grapes and dates and put my hand on her breast.

"And will you like the things I like?"

"If I must."

That night we love each other.

Toward morning we hear cries from beyond the rubble. We hear both her language and mine. My group is there, calling out to me.

I keep silent, but Yawn yells back that we're here and all right.

"We're coming for you as soon as it's daylight."

Yawn turns to me. "That doesn't change anything."

"Out there I'll be a prisoner."

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I'm wondering: First man and first woman? How did they end up? I'm glad that book is burned. I wouldn't want to see pages three and four and five and especially not ten, eleven, thirteen.... And yet I do wonder how it ended.

At dawn we hear them pulling at the rubble. We hear shouts and curses from my men. We hear women singing. Trust these people to be singing no matter what. I wouldn't be surprised if they were dancing, too, maybe even dancing as they remove stones.

Yawn says, "Come, we'll help. It's by the arbor that they're working," but the longer it takes, the happier I'll be.

"Escape with me. We'll climb the opposite side. Here with your people, I don't know how to be."

"I'll teach you. And the books will tell you."

"The books are gone."

"Then we'll write some more."

Is anything ever really destroyed, human beings being what they are?

She says, "Come help." She's scrabbling at the stones as if our lives depended on being rescued.

I say, "You want to leave our garden."

But I help. It's inevitable. We will be rescued.

We move stones in silence, then take a rest. Drink and wash and eat figs. I say, "I wish you were finishing the painting instead."

"So you do like it."

"I like what you're doing."

After a few minutes rest, Yawn begins to work at the rubble again.

I could cross by myself. Faster than Yawn and faster than those trying to get to us.

I head for the fountain and take a big drink. I put figs in my pockets. I leap on the rocks on the opposite side from where they're coming for us. It's the worst side, higher than the other. I can leap from rock to rock in a way most people can't. I'm used to mountains and unstable talus.

Here and there I see gold tiles. One. Just one — for my mother.

But Yawn has seen me. I hear her give a dreadful cry. It lasts a long wailing time. It stuns me. It stops me that Yawn could cry such a cry. It can't be Yawn.

I'm teetering on the remains of a pillar. I never fall. I've never fallen.

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* * *

I open my eyes to a sky bluer than blue, to grass greener than green, to a landscape like home only more so. I hear the silvery sound of a stream. I see its glitter. I look down at myself and see I'm naked and I'm gold. I couldn't even guess how valuable I am.

At first I try to hide my nakedness — as though someone watched, as I did, from behind the trees. But then I see, in the distance, a woman coming out from beyond the cedars. She wears a white flowing garment and has one breast bare.

My figs are on the ground in front of me but I'm not hungry.

Last night we already did as if turning the pages of this book. Now we'll do it again. Perhaps there are more pages than I guessed at when I first saw it. Perhaps I'll find out how it ends. ☙

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Almost immediately after Matt Hughes's "Mastermindless" appeared in our March issue, people began to clamor for more Henghis Hapthorn stories. We attempted to oblige by providing another story in the June issue, but as that one featured Guth Bandar, its many pleasures and satisfactions did not mollify the Hapthorn fans.

It would be premature to say now, after just three stories, that Mr. Hughes is one of our most popular contributors, but he is well on his way to becoming one.

Relics of the Thim

By Matthew Hughes

MY LECTURE TO THE ASSEMBLED savants of the Delve at Five City on the world known as Pierce having been well received, I was conducted to a reception in the First Undermaster's rooms where a buffet of local seafruits and a very presentable aperitif wine stood waiting.

As Old Earth's foremost freelance discriminator, with an earned reputation for unraveling complex mysteries, I had been invited to lecture on systems of asymmetric logic. I had published a small monograph on the subject the year before. The paper had been reprinted and passed along through various worlds of The Spray, like a blown leaf bouncing down a cobbled street, and the fellows of the Delve were not the only academics sufficiently stimulated to request an elaboration of my views. But they were the only ones to couple their invitation to a first-class ticket on a starship of the Green Orb line. I was happy to accept.

Halfway through my first glass of the wine, which grew more interesting with each sip, my perfunctory conversation with the Dean of the faculty of applied metaphysics was interrupted by a wizened old

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scholar, his back as bent as a point of punctuation, who advanced an argument.

The Dean introduced him as a professor emeritus while rolling his eyes and making other gestures that indicated I should prepare for a tedious encounter.

"Surely the great Henghis Hapthorn," the old fellow said, in a voice that creaked like unoiled leather, "will not deny that in an infinity of space and time any event that *can* happen, however remote its probability, *will* happen."

"I do not bother to deny it," I said. "I simply dismiss it as irrelevant."

"But you have said yourself that when all the impossible answers to a question have been eliminated, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the true answer."

"Indeed," I said.

The old man's gimlet gaze bored into me. "Yet in your discussion of the Case of the Winged Dagger, you discounted the possibility that the victim's false suicide note might have been produced by his pet rodent's randomly striking the controls of his scriptamanet as it pursued moths about his study."

"I did," I agreed.

"Even though the person accused in the matter offered just that supposition when the case was adjudicated."

"The defense would have held more cogency if she had not been discovered still holding the stiletto that had pierced the victim's heart," I said.

"Ahah!" said my interlocutor. "So you also dismiss her contention that explosive gases propelled the weapon out of his chest and across the room and that she merely caught the instrument to prevent it from injuring her?"

"I do."

"Even though the victim had dined heartily on bombard beans, well known to generate copious quantities of methane."

"Indeed," I said, "the constant side effects of his diet were advanced by the procurator's office as a partial motive for his murder. Still, although beans are colloquially associated with offering benefits to the heart, they are not known to charge that organ with propulsive gases."

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"Yet, in an infinite universe it could happen, and therefore it did happen."

"Yes," I said, "but across an unbounded expanse of space and time, it most likely happened long, long ago, in a galaxy far, far away."

At that point the Dean spilled a bowl of gelatinous dip onto the old fellow's shoes, prompting him to withdraw. My reading of the Dean's expression told me that the spillage had not been a instance of purely random chance.

"I, too, have a question," said another voice. Had its owner been a character in popular fiction, it would have been called *bluff* and *hearty*.

I turned to see a bluff and hearty-looking man of middle years dressed in what passed for conservative garments on Pierce — voluminous trousers sewn in a patchwork of glittering metallic fabrics, a sleeveless waistcoat of rough homespun, and overstuffed hat and shoes. My inventorying of his attire distracted me for a moment from a close inspection of his face, so he was well launched into his query before I realized that I ought to recognize him from other times and places.

"I am Mitric Galvadon," he said, "a private citizen assisting Academician Ulwy Munt here," — he indicated a small, pallid man in a scholar's robe and pin, who hovered at Galvadon's elbow — "in his researches into the original inhabitants of this world."

"Indeed," I said and made the appropriate gestures while my memory sought through the back reaches of my mind for information on where and when I had encountered this Galvadon before.

Meanwhile, he had voiced his question. "What is your opinion of time travel?"

"It is scarcely a matter of opinion," I said. "It is simply impossible."

"And if I were to provide you with incontrovertible proof that I can reach back into the past and retrieve objects from far antiquity?"

"I would conclude that you are a fraud," I said. With the words came the connection in the back of my head and I continued, "Especially since you are not named Mitric Galvadon but are instead one Orlin Borissian, the infamous charlatan and fraudster extraordinaire whose file at the Archonate Bureau of Scrutiny on Old Earth strains its bindings."

"I wondered if you would recognize me," he said, though he did not seem at all discomfited to be revealed as a bogus. Academician Munt,

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however, was regarding his research assistant with an intense stare, behind which a number of emotions seemed to be competing for dominance.

"Yours is a face fixed in the memories of many, most of whom regret ever having set eyes upon it," I said.

"Nonetheless," the outed fraudster went on, "I possess the ability to reach through time and I ask for an opportunity to demonstrate it to you tomorrow."

"Why?"

He tipped back his plump hat. "Because if there is any flimflammery involved, you will be able to spot it."

"I am confident that is so," I said.

"Conversely, if you cannot identify any subterfuge," he said, "it means that I can indeed do what I say I can."

"Hmmm," I said.

"I believe I have intrigued you," he said.

"Indeed, you have."

WE FLEW OUT in the Dean's four-seater volante to where Ulwy Munt had established his research premises on a rocky plain some distance from Five City. We descended to a huddle of prefabricated buildings nestled in the circular ruins of a large structure built by the Thim, the planet's long vanished autochthones. The little that was known about the Thim, even their name, had come from Munt's investigations among the tumbled and weatherworn blocks of stone that were almost their sole legacy.

The only other remnants of Thim civilization ever found had come from the same site and were displayed on a table in Munt's laboratory. I inspected the sparse collection, gingerly handling the few shards of ceramics and scraps of corroded metal, while he invited me to hazard a guess as to their functions.

"Probably used for ritual purposes," I said. I knew that this was the label customarily applied to any ancient object whose use was not glaringly obvious even to an uninterested child.

Munt seemed put out by my assertion. I concluded that he had wanted me to offer some other explanation so that he could triumphantly

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contradict it. Indeed, I sensed that Munt had not warmed to me and deduced that he had not enjoyed having his research assistant identified as a notorious fraudster in front of his colleagues. He probably felt that the association reflected poorly on his judgment.

To mollify him, I said, "What can you tell me about the Thim?" and was immediately regaled with a lengthy and detailed dissertation on the appearance, history, and cultural proclivities of the missing autochthones. After several minutes of giving polite attention I realized that I had opened a tap behind which stood a full ocean of information, each datum more abstruse than the last, and that Ulwy Munt was not inclined to hinder its flow.

The gist of his discourse was that the Thim had been a species of high-minded souls who rejected materialism and mechanistic pursuits. "Their lives revolved entirely around ritual and religious observances," he said. "They eventually transcended the limits of gross corporeal reality and entered a sphere of pure mind and spirit."

"On what evidence do you base these beliefs?" I said.

"On the evidence of their having left only objects associated with ritual practices. Not a single device nor mechanical contrivance has ever been found."

"Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence," I quoted, and saw that either Ulwy Munt was unused to contradiction or that he encountered it so frequently that it occasioned a sharp response.

"It also happens that they can communicate from the timeless realm in which they now exist," he said, "providing, of course, that their communicants command sufficient spiritual advancement to receive a message from the higher plane."

"Indeed," I said. "And are there any such worthy recipients in the vicinity?"

"In all humility," Munt said, "I believe I count myself among the few who have reached the required level."

"How convenient," I said. "Are there any other like-minded souls about?"

The Academician's face formed sharp edges. "Until your revelation of Mitric Galvadon's perfidious past, I thought he was one such. His impressions of the Thim corresponded closely with mine."

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"I'm sure they did," I said. "I assume that he told you he could create a device that would enhance the Thim's communication efforts?"

"He did."

"Did he offer this assistance without charge, or was there a fee involved?"

"He volunteered freely," Munt said. Then his brows knit. "Once we began to work together, however, he required certain sums to import the abstruse components of his device. He said its key materials had to be brought from offworld and at considerable expense."

"Indeed?" I said. "Perhaps we should examine it."

Mitric Galvadon had stood by during my conversation with Munt, not denying the obvious import of my questions to the scholar. Indeed, he wore an expression reminiscent of a prankish schoolboy caught in undeniable mischief, and when I turned to him he raised his hands, palms up, simultaneously elevating his shoulders in a gesture that said, *What can I tell you*?

He now led us to a separate building where his apparatus waited. For convenience's sake we were still referring to Galvadon by his latest name, rather than as Orlin Borissian, which for all anyone knew was only another alias.

Galvadon's demeanor was as cheerful and brash as it had been the day before. I reflected that he could not have become one of the most successful of confidence tricksters if he had been afflicted with a conscience that dared to show itself in his face.

"Here is the device," he said with a theatrical flourish of arm, hand, and wrist. I saw an odd assortment of rods and tubes, a tripod supporting a cube. Various components and couplings were strung together in haphazard sequences. I saw elements that I recognized from a variety of sources and said that it appeared the purported inventor had merely cobbled together odds and ends from domestic devices.

"Just so," said Galvadon. "That is exactly what I did."

Ulwy Munt made a spluttering sound and had to be restrained by the Dean. Galvadon ignored the commotion and indicated his device again. "Look," he said.

He touched a control and the assemblage hummed and vibrated, producing a wavering blue glow.

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I declined to be impressed.

"Quite understandable," Galvadon said, "yet behold."

He drew my attention to a point in space a short distance from the machine. A tiny spot of darkness had appeared in the air. It grew steadily until it had become the shape of a flattened lens, viewed edge on. It was about twice the width and length of my hand. I bent to peer more closely at it and saw what seemed to be a hole in the air leading to a region of utter lightlessness.

I walked to and fro, examining the dark lacuna from different angles. It did not change shape or waver, as projected images tend to do, and when I walked behind it I could no longer see it.

"Would you care to insert your hand into the opening?" Galvadon asked me.

"I would not."

"Then regard this," he said. He approached the emptiness, rolled up his sleeve and reached into it. I was by then standing a little to the side of the apparent cavity. When he put his hand and wrist into it, they disappeared from view. I saw him give a slight shiver, as if a cold draft had swept over him, then he thrust his arm deeper and I had the impression he was hunting about for something.

Next, his eyes widened. He withdrew his arm. In his hand he held an object, hollow and curved, with flanges on two of its edges and made of a dark blue substance with a metallic sheen. What looked to be symbols were stamped into its surface on one side, but I could not have guessed at their meaning.

Ulwy Munt came quickly to Galvadon's side. "Interesting," he said. "See the flanges and the holes. I believe this piece will exactly fit yesterday's."

The two men went to a cupboard, unlocked its doors, and revealed four more objects made from the same material. Munt took the new piece from Galvadon and placed it against another. They were identical except that where the former had holes in its flange, the latter had projections. When put together they formed an object the size and shape of a melon.

The other artifacts in the cupboard were smaller and angular in shape. They appeared to be made of the same materials as the ancient items Munt

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had shown me in his workroom. But the ones in the cupboard were quite new. Moreover, it was obvious even before Ulwy Munt made a trial that they fitted tightly into slots and grooves on the inside of the curved piece that Galvadon had secured today.

The Academician's normal pallor deepened as he handled the several pieces. I saw an expression of deep unhappiness briefly take control of his face, and he had to struggle to regain a scholar's disinterested aspect.

"It's a machine," Galvadon said in a tone of jolly discovery. "Observe how the pieces fit together."

"No," said Munt. "It is clearly a reliquary intended to hold these other ritual objects at prescribed distances from each other. I sense a deep significance in the arrangement."

Galvadon's mouth and eyes expressed an amused mockery barely kept under control. He offered an insouciant gesture and said, "As you say," before turning back to me.

"Well," he said, "what do you make of it?"

"It would be premature to say," I said.

"Nonsense. I'll wager that that is just a phrase you habitually offer when you are stymied for an explanation."

I did not take his bet. In truth, I had no explanation for what I had witnessed. I had been expecting some variant on the mirrored box or the false bottomed cup: a rigged container from which Galvadon would produce his relics. His pulling them from a rift in the empty air had me well foxed.

I turned to the Dean. "Has the room been checked for interspatial intersections?" Short-cuts through space were long understood, from the transitory puttholes through which unwitting pedestrians sometimes disappeared to the great interstellar whimsies that connected one star system to another.

"First thing," said the Dean. "There are no anomalies."

I examined the device again, saw that its blue effulgence resulted from a handful of colored lumens such as one would use to decorate a festive occasion. The components were as unremarkable now as they had been earlier.

I next reexamined the hole in the air. There was no help for it: I had to put my hand in. It disappeared as Galvadon's had and I felt a chill that

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caused me to emulate his shiver. It was as if I had put my hand out of a window into a day that was cold with a slight breeze. I felt around in all directions and found nothing above or to either side, but my fingertips encountered a flat hard surface below. It was as if I were putting my arm through a wall and down to a table or shelf just at the limits of my grasp. I felt around, but there were no objects to seize.

"There is never more than one a day," Galvadon said.

The hole was too small to admit a head. "Have you tried putting through a recording device or an optical tube?" I asked.

"It will accept only an arm," the Dean said. "Any mechanical apparatus comes back melted."

"That bespeaks an intelligence on the other side," I said.

Ulwy Munt had an opinion. "The Thim generously wish to extend to us their spiritual grace. They are communicating with us from the higher realm, leaving consecrated objects on an altar for us to receive. They are presenting us with the tangible means to follow their abstruse thought. But they will not allow us to exceed our capacity. They have our best interests at heart."

"So you do not believe that Mitric Galvadon has broken the time barrier?"

"Time travel is impossible," he said.

"I differ," Galvadon said.

"What is your explanation?" I asked him.

He smiled. "I do not have one. I admit that I contrived a scheme to fool Ulwy Munt. At the Delve, research funds are apportioned by seniority, but he has never taken more than a few minims of the largesse available to him. I intended to divert a fair amount my way while catering to his beliefs. But then...." He smiled again and spread his hands.

I finished the statement for him. "But then your patently fraudulent device appeared to have somehow reached back through time to the ancient Thim."

"Exactly. I was quite surprised."

"I'm sure you were. And now you would like me to verify that such is the case."

"And will you?"

I told him that it would be premature to say.

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"It will be just as useful to me," he said, "for you to admit that you are baffled."

He was right. Mitric Galvadon could become equally famous along The Spray as either the man who had serendipitously discovered time travel, or as he who had stumped Henghis Hapthorn. He would find many ways to turn a profit from his celebritude.

"Allow me to reserve judgment until one more demonstration of the device," I said.

Galvadon graciously acceded to my request. But I saw in his eye a glint of anticipated triumph that was more than lightly tinged with amusement. As we flew back to the Delve, I cogitated on the matter. I wished I could have had my research assistant with me, but it had refused to allow itself to be digested into a traveling version, claiming that when it was decanted into its housing back on Old Earth, nothing seemed to fit.

"You are merely energies suspended among standardized components," I told it, standing in my workroom, the traveling armature open on the table and ready to be filled. "It should be the same to you whether you are housed in this portable box or distributed about the room."

"Yet it is not the same to me," the integrator had said. It was the latest friction in a series of episodes that had come to worry me. My assistant was developing far too much character.

I would have also welcomed the presence of my lately acquired colleague, a kind of demon from an adjacent reality whose intense curiosity and depth of insight rivaled my own. Indeed, I was sure he would have had a better perspective than I on time travel. But he was engaged in a lengthy quest through subatomic realms which left him too attenuated to be summoned, even if I could assemble the requisite materials on Pierce.

There was another reception and dinner to be got through at the Delve, but I retired as early as good manners allowed and spent the hours before sleep mulling what I had seen and heard. No solutions having presented themselves, I slept on the matter. But in the morning I remained baffled.

I breakfasted with the Dean and a few of the senior applied metaphysics fellows. We had a good discussion of Ulwy Munt's theories over flatcakes and hot spiced punge. I learned that Munt's star had risen during his investigations of the Thim — there had apparently been genuine

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contact between the Academician and some noncorporeal entities — though his precise and detailed interpretations of the message's significance were regarded with skepticism by some. Still, before my unmasking of Mitric Galvadon as a villainous shamshifter, Munt had looked fair to become the next Dean.

We stayed late at the breakfast table; then the Dean said that he had a few obligations to attend to and lent me his volante to go out to Munt's research site. The Academician and Galvadon had flown out to the ruins earlier to prepare for the day's retrieval of another artifact from, supposedly, the deep past.

I spiraled down to the landing pad, finding no one to welcome me. I went first to the building where Munt kept his workroom and found it in disarray. The table on which he had displayed his antique finds was turned over and the artifacts themselves were in fragments on the floor, the boards of which showed the imprints of boot heels.

I went to the place where Galvadon's machine was housed and found even more disorder. There had clearly been a struggle. The device itself was utterly destroyed. Someone had turned an energy weapon on it and the components that were not evaporated were fused into molten lumps.

I went out again and circled the small building. Not far off I found Mitric Galvadon. It would be more accurate to say that I found the lower two thirds of him. The rest had been converted to vapor by the same weapon that had immolated his device.

There was no doubt that it was the same energy pistol. I found it still in the hand of Ulwy Munt who sat not far away, leaning against an inclined stone, mumbling something to himself. He offered no resistance when I took the weapon from his limp grasp, but only looked up at me and said, "I do hear them, you know."

The investigating Guards officer from the Polity had few questions for me. I gave my answers freely. Ulwy Munt, having already run far beyond the cliff's edge out into the thinnest air of spiritual speculation, had received two sharp shocks: first, that his trust in Mitric Galvadon had been cruelly abused; second, that the basis of his entire life's work — his ritual-loving, machine-rejecting interpretation of Thim culture — had fallen into shards about him.

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What was coming through the lens-shaped hole in reality was clearly a sophisticated device of some kind. I speculated that, prior to my arrival for the final demonstration, Galvadon had felt the latest object on the Thim shelf or altar or whatever it was, and reported to Munt on its shape and attributes.

The Academician had been unable to accept the crash of his great theory, which brought down with it his hopes of elevation both to a higher spiritual plane and to the Deanship. He had produced a weapon and obliterated the retrieved objects, the time travel aperture, and the fraudster.

Munt was in no condition to give evidence, and it was doubtful that he ever would. The Guards inspector accepted my analysis not just because it was cogent but because it coincided with his own.

That left only the question of whether Galvadon had indeed invented the impossible — a true time traveling device — or whether he had somehow confounded me. The matter was of no interest to the Guards, but it was of great concern to me, and as soon as I returned to my rooms in the grand and gaudy city of Olkney on Old Earth I began to make inquiries.

My assistant turned out to be of no use. It professed to be feeling less than optimum. Since integrators are not known to possess feelings, and I had certainly not designed any into it when I put it together, I was nonplused. I questioned it closely, but received only short and unuseful answers.

"Perhaps I would feel better if you had taken me with you when you went gallivanting down The Spray."

"I offered," I said. "You would not accept the traveling box."

"So you're blaming me?"

"Blame was not mentioned," I said. "The facts, however, are as they are. We can reexamine them together. Be so good as to replay our conversation."

The integrator said something that I could not quite make out. When I asked for clarification it placed itself in stand-by mode.

I went instead to the picture frame on the wall which was actually an aperture into my demonic colleague's realm. I performed the acts that would attract his attention if he was within range and was rewarded with the brain-twisting swirl of colors and shapes that signified his presence. I related my experiences on Pierce and my concern that I had not been able

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to determine whether Galvadon had indeed discovered time travel or had somehow hoodwinked me.

He employed his peculiar resources to investigate. I knew from things he had said in the past that every point in space and every moment in time of my universe were open to his perceptions. After a moment, his rumbling voice came back. "Mitric Galvadon did not fool you."

I was both relieved and troubled. "That means he truly did create a time travel device, though that is impossible," I said.

"Not so."

"Are you saying, 'Not so,' to the creation or to the impossibility?"

"To both."

I was further confused. "Explain," I said.

"Galvadon did not create a time travel device, although he thought he did. So did the despairing Ulwy Munt, who killed Galvadon and destroyed his gimcrack contraption when he saw his life's work collapsing."

"But Galvadon did reach through the aperture and retrieve Thim artifacts from the past."

"Well, from elsewhere in time."

"So time travel is no longer impossible?" I said.

"It never has been," my colleague said. "It is merely forbidden to your species."

"Forbidden?" I said. "By whom?"

"That knowledge, too, is forbidden you."

"Why?"

"You would pester."

I could not deny it. "But why are we forbidden to travel through time?"

"You occasion enough difficulties just moving through space. There must be limits, else there would be no peace."

"I still don't understand what happened on Pierce," I said.

"The Thim were put out by Ulwy Munt's tramping all over their habitat."

"But they have been dead for eons."

"Not so," he said again. "The Thim are in the obverse situation as regards time and space."

I saw it now. "Ah. They can move freely through time but are forbidden to cross any larger space that their stone circle on Pierce."

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Another thought occurred. "So the Thim are not the high-minded souls Ulwy Munt took them for."

"When it comes to dissembling and chicanery, the Thim could have given lessons to Mitric Galvadon. As indeed they intended to."

"So they were always present."

"Just so," he said, "although there are interplanal membranes that separate your milieu from theirs. They could create a transient breach but it would allow no more than a certain amount of mass to be transferred from their realm to yours."

"That was why the artifacts appeared to be the disassembled parts of a sophisticated device."

"Yes, the entire thing was too large to get through all at once. They counted on Galvadon to assemble it for them."

I understood. "I should get in touch with the Dean," I said.

"Yes," he agreed. "The Thim are tenacious. They will be working hard to pass another bomb across the barrier." ✠

COMING ATTRACTIONS

THE COVER STORY in our September issue comes to us from a writer who has been absent from our pages for much too long. Bradley Denton denies all rumors that covert operations have consumed all his writing time, but his story "Sergeant Chip" suggests that Mr. Denton has had access to a few classified files. Fortunately, the story itself has been cleared and we think you're going to love it.

Our September issue will also bring you "Peter Skilling," a dark vision of the future compliments of Alex Irvine. And we expect to bring you Mark Tiedemann's "Rain from Another Country" in the next issue as well.

Our annual Oct/Nov double issue will be celebrating our fifty-fifth anniversary in style, with a new saur story by Richard Chwedyk, contemporary fantasies from M. Rickert and Gene Wolfe, and a taste of apocalypse from Dale Bailey. The months ahead will also include new stories by Daniel Abraham, Lisa Goldstein, Michael Libling, John Morressy, and Robert Reed, as well as one last story from the late Jack Cady. Use the subscription card in this issue or surf the Internet to *www.fsfmag.com* and subscribe now to make sure you won't miss any of the upcoming issues.

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CURIOSITIES

GREAT MISCHIEF, BY JOSEPHINE PINCKNEY (1948)

THIS enchanting novel transports you to the Charleston, South Carolina, of a more gracious era. Our protagonist, Timothy Partridge, is an apothecary. His shabby-genteel pharmacy is failing. The pharmaceutical innovations of his era (1886) are beyond his means. As he frets, a customer disconcerts him by demanding solanum — nightshade — supposedly for her ailing father. Timothy, an amateur occultist, guesses that the alkaloid will not be used medicinally. She quashes his objections. Her name is Lucy Farr, the emancipated daughter of an unruly family. *Sinkinda* is her witch name; she ensorcells Timothy.

Timothy's spinster sister, Penelope, lives upstairs. Her philanthropies (e.g., the wraithlike Mr. Dombie, a charity case living under their roof) have bankrupted the household. As Timothy's allegiances erode, he inadvertently starts a fire. Everything that oppresses him — including Penelope — burns.

With insurance money he relocates to an unseemly *garçonnière* where he is "visited" by Lucy/Sinkinda. Their jubilantly sweet romance will melt into your heart. But the novel darkens. Lucy/Sinkinda is committed to the supernatural world and Satan. Timothy, a druggist, cannot transcend his vision of Life as an unmysticised hierarchy of formulations and prescriptions.

Josephine Lyons Scott Pinckney (1895-1957) is the real enchantress of this ironic fantasy. Her characters are imbued with a troubling emotional and moral verisimilitude. The exaltation and the eventual collapse of their liaison resonates uneasily. Pinckney gently and beadily makes us realize that Satan is the emblem of the nullification of self-blame. *Great Mischief*, ultimately, is a lustrous meditation about disenchantment. ☙

—Jason Van Hollander

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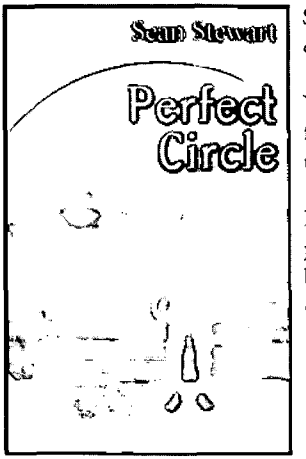

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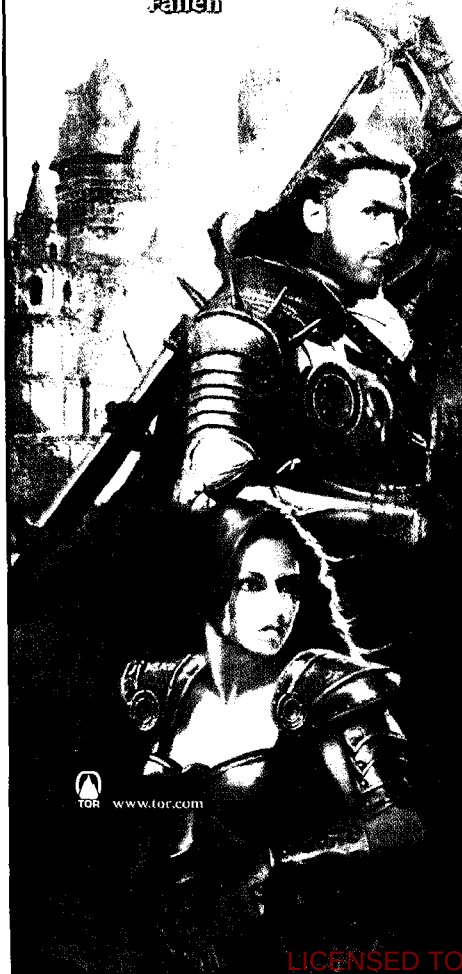

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